SHE WORE HIS BRAND

WESTERN

Romances

25¢

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JULY 1959

I WAS IN HER BLOOD!

RENEGADE KISSES

Now—Run Your Car Without Spark Plugs—

Get Up to 31 More Horse-Power, 8 More Miles per Gallon

USING ONLY REGULAR GAS!

Yes—this revolutionary new FIRE INJECTION SYSTEM—installed in 15 minutes, must deliver maximum power and economy WITHOUT CHANGING TO HIGH-PRICED PREMIUM GAS—must give you up to 31 more H.P., 8 more miles per gallon for the life of your car!

Spark plugs control the efficiency of your engine. Yet, not only do they give a small, weak spark to begin with, but they get worse every mile you drive. And that you can see for yourself. Put a new set of spark plugs in your car and then look at them at 100 miles, at a thousand miles, at 5,000 miles. Every time you look you will see more filth and carbon and more of the electrode burning away.

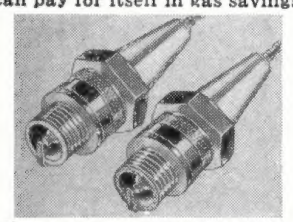
STOP USING SPARK PLUGS!

Now, read very carefully what I'm going to suggest... *that you stop using spark plugs!* That's right—get rid of them—forever. But . . . if you get rid of your spark plugs, what will ignite the gasoline and make the motor run?

Well, please remember that today you can have *gas injection* and get far more mileage, efficiency and power from less gas—and in a few years gas injection will have completely replaced the carburetor. In the same way, now is the time for Americans to replace old-fashioned, temporary, inefficient spark plugs with a modern, efficient, permanent fire injection system!

PAYS FOR ITSELF IN ONE MONTH!

Now, the SA FIRE INJECTION system is so inexpensive that it can pay for itself in gas savings



alone in one month of driving. Forget for the moment about the extra pep, power, performance . . . the savings in spark plug servicing and replacement . . . the savings in wear and tear on pistons and cylinders. Just remember this fire injection system will pay for itself in *one month* of driving! Here's how:

A spark plug jumps a spark across an air gap, limiting the size. A fire injector fires on the surface of a conductor. You get a heavy, powerful flame that will not blow out!

On ordinary spark plugs the air gap is always getting bigger, wasting power and gas. A fire injector has no air gap and no electrode to burn away. It never needs cleaning or setting; it actually become more efficient with use. It will actually outlast any car, delivering maximum efficiency without servicing or replacement.

With ordinary spark plugs you should be using premium gas, which costs from 4 to 8 cents more than regular gas. With fire injectors regular gas wil give you up to 8 more miles per gallon, up to 31 more horsepower—plus easier starting in all weather!

PROVE IT TO YOURSELF!

If you have automatic transmission, make a note of how fast your car crawls forward when it is in the drive position, with the motor idling. If you have a sports car, a racing car or a boat, make a note of the RPMs as indicated on the tachometer when the engine is idling. If you have regular transmission, put your car in low gear on a level road and notice its speed with the motor idling. Next, remove your spark plugs, and screw the injectors right into the spark plug openings. Then—no matter what kind of gas you have been using—fill your tank with the *poorest regular gas* you can buy. That's all you have to do to see the most amazing results you can imagine!

CHECK RESULTS CAREFULLY

If you have automatic transmission—now put your car in drive and let your engine idle. If your car stood still with spark plugs, *it will move forward at from 4 to 6 miles per hour;* that means that the amount of gas that just kept your engine turning over will now carry you up to 6 miles at no cost to you!

If you have a racing car, sports car or a boat ,your RPMs will *increase up to 200 more at idling—up to 300 more at higher speeds.* If you have regular transmission, in low gear and with your motor idling *your car will move forward 4 to 6 miles per hour faster.* In other words, no matter what you drive, here is absolute proof that you can go further, faster and cheaper when you install SA FIRE INJECTORS in your car!

MAIL THE COUPON!

Up to now these SA FIRE INJECTORS were practically made by hand and would have had to sell for as high as $5 each. But we know that 30 or 40 dollars for a set of 6 to 8 SA FIRE INJECTORS was more than the average driver could afford—so we decided to get the price down so low that these injectors would pay for themselves 12 times, in one year of driving. So here is my astonishing proposition. If you will check your car's performance carefully before and after you install your SA FIRE INJECTORS and then tell your friends and neighbors about them, you can have a set of SA FIRE INJECTORS for the year and model of your car for a fraction of their value . . . that's $1.49 each . . . only $8.94 for a 6-cylinder car or $11.92 for an 8-cylinder car. Now, if your SA FIRE INJECTORS don't meet my GUARANTEE—if they do not continue to deliver maximum performance for the life of your car . . . you get your money back on 10-day no-risk basis. Mail the coupon now!

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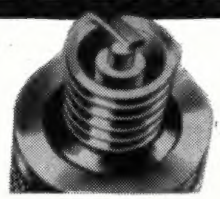

SPARK PLUG

FIRE INJECTOR

CHECK THESE DIFFERENCES

Fires across air gap	NO air gap required
Wire electrode burns away	NO wire electrode
Carbon ruins firing tip	NO tip deterioration
Needs cleaning and setting	NO cleaning or setting ever
Needs periodic replacing	NO replacing
Needs premium gas	NO premium gas needed
Must have exact heat range	NO heat range
Spark blows out under pressure	NO blowing out even at highest compressions

GUARANTEE — INSURANCE — INDEMNITY

Take your set of SA FIRE INJECTORS and install them immediately; then, give your new injection system every test you can think of . . . starting — acceleration — gas mileage — motor pep and smoothness for 10 full days. You must get up to 31 more horsepower — up to 8 more miles per gallon — increased engine RPMs — faster starting, blazing acceleration, freedom from knocks and pings, easier starting in all kinds of weather . . . AND DO ALL OF THESE THINGS ON REGULAR GAS, OR YOU GET YOUR MONEY BACK.

As long as the SA FIRE INJECTORS are in your car you are covered by a PRODUCT LIABILITY INSURANCE POLICY, endorsed by an internationally famous insurance company.

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Yes, I want new pep, power and performance from my automobile! Please send me:

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- ☐ Single SA FIRE INJECTORS (No. .....) at $1.49 each
- ☐ Enclosed is the full price for the SA FIRE INJECTORS. You pay the postage. In addition, I will receive as a special FREE Bonus a famous illustrated 62-page "Economy Driving Handbook."
- ☐ Send my SA FIRE INJECTORS C.O.D.

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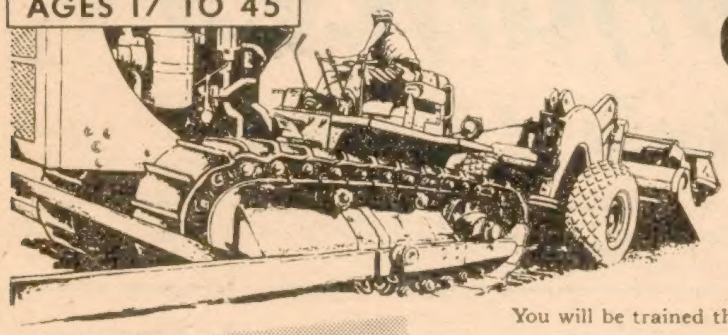

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WESTERN

Romances

Love Stories of The West

Volume 9 July, 1959 Number 4

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MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Editor*

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, Managing Editor

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GAIN MORE WEIGHT IN 10 DAYS OR YOUR MONEY BACK!

LOOK AT
SKINNY!
I wouldn't be seen with him!
LATER
AM I PROUD OF THE WAY THE GIRLS LOOK AT YOU!
...AND HE USED TO BE SO SKINNY!
GREW A MAN!

SKINNY

MEN ARE OFTEN ASHAMED TO STRIP FOR SPORTS OR FOR A SWIM!

GIRLS ARE NOT ALLURING AND DON'T HAVE EYE-CATCHING CURVES!

CHILDREN WHO WON'T EAT AND ARE UNDER-WEIGHT, OFTEN CALLED SKINNY!

Now at last More-Wate plan that puts firm, attractive pounds and inches on your body, chest, arms and legs.

Amazing New Way developed by modern medical science to put on weight on lean bodies. **Guaranteed** to give you up to an **extra pound a day!** Or **your money back!** Why should you dread going to parties and socials, simply because you look scrawny and spindly? Why ever feel self-conscious about your body again? If you're **underweight*** . . . or just a little on the thin side, due to faulty appetite, or bad dietary habits, you can **put on up to a pound a day of attractive weight** without exercise . . . dangerous drugs . . . or special diet . . . and more quickly, more easily than you ever dreamed possible . . . with MORE-WATE. MORE-WATE contains no dangerous drugs . . . you **eat it like candy!** Yet . . . if you were to have this same prescription compounded to your order, it would cost you many times more. However, through this introductory offer, you can obtain **4-way** MORE-WATE tablets . . . a full 10 days' supply . . . for just $1.00 or a 30 day supply for only $2.98, plus a 10 day supply free, with an absolute money-back guarantee! Yes, try MORE-WATE for TEN DAYS . . . and if not entirely delighted with weight gained, return the unused supply for full refund! You've nothing to lose . . . and **weight to gain!** Act now! Stop being the guy or the gal that everyone calls "skinny." Stop being the guy or the gal who dreads summer and going to parties and socials because it means everyone will enjoy themselves and you won't. Don't be a wallflower, because you have a figure like a broomstick! **Gain more weight!**

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SENT ON APPROVAL—MAKE AMAZING 10-DAY TEST

I WAS IN HER BLOOD

But it's no good forcing a woman — carrying her off and making her hate you!

THE ROCKING C sign spanning the road to the ranch house still sagged on its two uprights, like most everything else on the Croft spread, but this afternoon I scarcely noticed it. All I could think about was Nancy and the news that had sent me pounding across the range from the town of Bushwack Creek a half an hour ago.

My three riders and I had just gotten back from many weeks hard riding on the trail to Abilene with my small herd, and were standing at the bar of the Last Chance Saloon when the news hit me straight between the eyes. First off, I'd thought Charlie Wilson, one of the small ranchers, was drunk, but he'd sounded sober enough when he told me.

"I ought to kill you for that lie," I said and I could feel the hot flame of anger.

"I was doin' you a favor," he said g r u f f l y. "I supposed you'd want to know."

Blindly, I'd gone out of the saloon and got my horse. I'd galloped hard across the grass green land.

Nancy must have been expecting me to come, because as I rode up to the two story house with its flaking white paint there under the cottonwoods, she came out on the veranda, her hand shading her eyes. My love for her was strong and big and it ran through me now like fire through the brush.

There was no welcoming smile on her beautiful face. No sign that only a few weeks ago when she'd kissed me goodbye, she'd told me she loved me like I loved her. That night I knew that she knew I meant to marry her when I came back from Abilene... That next dawn I'd gone singing up the trail, loco with happiness. Now, if what I'd heard in town was true, the song was ended for me—and the happiness. But I'd have to hear Nancy say it with her own lips before I'd believe it.

She didn't come running down the yard as she always did, she waited on the veranda as I stepped out of the saddle and tied up. I thought again that

"I want to ask you a big question, Nancy," Lafe said—"when I come back."

she was the prettiest girl in the Territory. Her hair was bronze like a turkey's fan, her eyes dark as a doe's. And she had a slim, curvy figure to give a man notions.

I took off my Stetson and slapped some of the dust off my pants, then I closed the space between us.

"Nancy," I said harshly, "I wanted to kill Charlie for saying you were going to marry Ash Merritt. That you wanted to be mistress of the Bar M. Should I have killed him for lying, Nancy?"

Her eyes were clear and unflinching as they met mine. After a minute she said, "Come inside, Lafe. It's hot out here."

There was a great emptiness in me because Nancy hadn't hurried to deny

it. I suppose I knew right then that Charlie hadn't lied. I swallowed and it wasn't only the dust that tightened up my throat.

I FOLLOWED her inside. The big room showed mighty plain that none of the Crofts made any money, as plain as the rest of the spread. Nancy had done her best with the little she'd had to spend, the cheap curtains were clean and bright and she'd made the hooked rugs herself. The house she kept scrupulously clean, but no amount of soap and water could hide the shabbiness.

She turned to face me, her shoulders back, her chin lifted defiantly. "Don't you understand, Lafe?" The words burst out of her. "I can't marry you. I've accepted Ash's proposal." When I started to interrupt, she stopped me. "I thought a lot about us after you left. I wouldn't marry you even if it weren't for Ash."

"Why?" I demanded and my hands ground the black Stetson they held.

"You're too ruthless, too quick with your guns. You're hard, and a girl would never know real peace and security with you." Her words rubbed raw the hurt in me.

"Ash told you that, I suppose?" I said bitterly. "And there's him and his old man's thousands of cattle, while I'm only a small rancher trying to build up my herds."

"It's a kind of mania with you to get more and more cattle," she said sadly. "You'd take your wife to a sod house without comforts in order to buy more cattle."

"The house is adobe," I said and fought down my temper. "It's comfortable enough." I took a step toward her. "I thought you wanted to build with me in these young years so that our children would have security and pride in our accomplishment." Her face gave no indication that she'd even heard me. "And Ash? What about him and his women?" My eyes bore down into hers and she flushed. "Will you like lying in his arms knowing they've been around every dance hall girl in town?"

"Stop it!" she blazed. "All that will change when we're married."

I laughed and it was so dry and harsh it sounded strange to me. Then I reached out and put my hands on her shoulders. "Why are you marrying him?" I shook her a little. "Why?"

"Stop, Lafe. You're hurting me." She pulled away and I let my hands fall. "It will be the making of Pa. With Ash's help he can start over and hold up his head again."

I snorted. Bill Croft was a shiftless, lazy man. He always had been; he always would be. It had been Nancy's mother who'd kept the Rocking C whipped into shape, who'd prodded Bill and her son Willie until they finally did the work, complaining and whining. Nancy's brother was as shiftless as his Pa, only wanting to hang around the saloons drinking and gambling. Nancy's marriage to the Merritt cattle empire would only make Willie the more arrogant and useless.

"There's no future for us, Lafe." Her voice broke, then steadied out. "None at all."

"It's you who make it so," I told her. "You've known since I rode into Bushwack Creek two years ago that I drive

hard, myself as much as my men. I use a gun to protect my cattle and my rights and I would use it to protect my wife." I suddenly felt tired and bone weary. I suppose that's what defeat does to a man. I looked at her and wondered if she knew she was taking away from me everything I wanted? And I wished to hell I knew the words so I could tell her what she meant to me.

"Your Pa and Willie hate my guts." I said. "They have since the day I told 'em what they were doing to you. Now they've influenced you to marry Ash because they think he'll be free-handed and they know I won't. I'd help 'em, but they'd have to work for it." My eyes held hers. "What about your heart?" I asked softly. "I don't believe your love for me is dead and I don't believe you can sell out your heart for cattle and a big sprawling house."

I REACHED for her and her face was frightened. Then Nancy was in my arms and I was kissing her with the hurt and hunger in me breaking free. I kissed her eyes, her soft neck, her warm lips. Her breasts, pressed tight against me, rose and fell with the passion of our kisses, of our wanting.

When I released her, I felt triumphant. That kiss meant she was still *my* girl, even though she denied it. It had held too much hunger for it to be otherwise.

"You had no right to do that," she said angrily and her slim, beautiful body was as taut as a violin string. "That was our good-bye, Lafe. I'm marrying Ashley."

"You little stubborn fool," I flung the words at her. "What kind of marriage can you have with one man when you're wanting another? I'm in your blood, Nancy, just as you're in mine. We belong together."

She moved to the fireplace, almost as if she seeked escape from me. "Don't fight me, Lafe. This is the way it must be," she told me with finality.

For a minute I couldn't move. It was like I was frozen there in Nancy's big room, with my hopes and dreams crashed around me. If I did what was right, I'd pick her up in my arms and ride off with her. But I'm a man of pride and I wanted my woman to come to me because she wanted me.

I looked at Nancy and was filled with black, hopeless anger. It seemed certain sure that Bill Croft had influenced his daughter, had whined and pleaded until she'd agreed to take Ash Merritt. Ash was a weak man and if it hadn't been for his father and grandfather and their fight to build up their enormous herds, he'd be just another good-natured drifter.

"I'll see Ash in hell before I'll let him have you," I vowed. There was a lot more I could have told her, if I only knew how. Like how I'd seen her face in the air and in the flash floods shining like a beacon and urging me on. At night I'd heard her voice in the wind. For every rugged, tortuous mile of that trail, in the heat and the dust, in the lightening and rain that spooked the herd, Nancy had ridden with me. But those are the things a man can't tell, not even to the woman he loves. I'm hard and I'm fast with my guns. Nancy was the softness in me, the gentler.

"Please go, Lafe," she begged. "We've said it all. Let's keep the memory sweet."

"Sure," I said and my mouth twisted. "Sell out your heart and keep a memory."

As I turned to the door, Bill Croft came in. He was a small, wiry man, grizzled with a kind of sly meanness in his slate colored eyes. Nancy had got all her looks from her Ma.

"Why, howdee, Lafe," he said offhand, as if I were a cowpoke asking for a handout.

"You ought to be sick of yourself" I said harshly, "for letting Nancy marry a man like Ash. A man who makes love to every woman he meets and always will."

"Whoa now, boy." He smirked. "A good woman is all he needs." Then, ignoring me, he turned to his daughter.

"I've just left your future Pa-in-law, honey. Come see the present he sent you." He almost danced in his elation.

There wasn't a damn thing I could say to make him see sense, so I had to stand aside while Nancy let out little cries of pleasure at the truly beautiful palomino tied beside my horse.

Without a word, I stepped into my saddle and rode out under the sagging sign and headed for the Split S, the little ranch I'd carved out of nothing in the two years I'd been here. Until Nancy had slapped it in my face, I'd looked at my achievement with some pride.

THE HURT in me was still raw as I rode toward home. I'd spent every dollar I could get my hands on to buy cattle, to build for the future. It hadn't been easy, before I fell in love, to give up carousing on Saturday nights with the boys and stay out of poker games in town because I couldn't afford to lose. In the beginning, I'd bought ten head here, five there, eking it out you might say.

I resented like hell the way Nancy had sneered at my house. Probably it wasn't much, just a small adobe that someday I'd build on to, but it was clean and comfortable enough. Nothing fancy, I'll admit that. But she ought to have known I couldn't afford a big, sprawling place like the Merritt's, not until my herds were first built up.

Gradually the anger seeped out of me. I tried to add this thing up rationally. Nancy had had a bitter struggle at home to just keep food on the table. She'd worked harder than any young girl should, even to mending fence and branding the young stock. Once she'd told me she'd never have her children grow up as she'd been forced to, needing clothes, needing food and knowing the other girls pitied her. I expect most of them were right glad to pity her because they were jealous of her beauty.

Reaching my own land, I got mad all over again. I'd done well enough these last two years. Ticks had cleaned out my Texas herd and the day I'd ridden into Bushwack Creek I'd been stony broke. The little adobe looked fine to me as it nestled under the trees. Sure Nancy might have been cramped a little for space there, but I'd have done something about it before we had any young ones. The outbuildings were in good shape and the horses looked well cared for in the big corral. And I'd got all this myself without no grandpa buildin' it up for me.

Even making this much of a start had caused me some little trouble with old man Merritt. He made it a practice to buy out any little fellow who started to show his muscles. Once in a while, one got stubborn and then he'd be found dead somewhere up in the hills, shot, Merritt claimed, by rustlers. Since our sheriff agreed, there wasn't much any of us could do. And it *could* be that he was shot by rustlers. So far, though Merritt hadn't shown his real fangs to me, because I hadn't got big enough. Someday I would be and I guess we both knew it.

I was awful mixed up about Nancy. On the one hand, she said I was too hard and fast with my guns; on the other, that I wasn't offering her enough. But she knew me, so she must have known that before long I, too, would be adding land and cattle. It looked like she'd decided her Pa and Willie would get more out of Ash Merritt than me. Nancy loved her folks, and if she knew they were shiftless and Willie a trouble-maker, she'd never said much about it. Loyalty, I guess.

ASH PROBABLY would be willing enough to give Bill and Willie plenty of credit in town, he might even pay Willie's gambling debts, but Ash wouldn't have much to say about it. After the excitement of his marriage to Nancy died down, it would be old John Merritt who'd call the turn. John only spoiled his own son.

It wouldn't take Nancy long to find out her freedom was cut and she'd be takin' orders from old John. He thought

women were good enough for cooking, raising kids and waiting on the menfolk. I don't think he really liked them as much as horses, not really. And that palomino today that he'd sent over to Nancy wasn't actually a gift, it was a loan until she married Ash. Let her try once ordering the horse saddled up and then she'd find out. I knew this because I knew John Merritt.

Some of my cattle were grazing in knee deep gamma grass the recent rains had greened up. There were yellow and blue flowers popping into bloom. It was a real pretty sight and I should have felt good getting back after the long trail to Abilene. I didn't I was sick at heart.

By the time I pulled up at the corral, I'd decided there wasn't anything much I could do to stop Nancy from ruining her own life—and mine. It's no good to force a girl, to grab her and carry her off somewhere, because she'll only end up hating you. One of the things I loved most about Nancy was her quiet pride and the strength in her to hold her bronze head high when things were going worst and she was ashamed.

One thing sure, I had to drive her out of my mind. I guess there was plenty around the place to keep me busy and so dog tired I'd sleep at night. There was the rest of the herd to see to and a new horse corral to build. If nights got too long, I'd sit in the penny ante poker games in the bunk house with Pete and my other two riders. Pete would be awful sad about Nancy and he'd help some. He'd try anyway, just as he had in Texas when my stock died like flies and I'd lost the ranch I'd inherited from my mother and built up into one of the best. That early dawn I'd ridden away, Pete had been there beside me saying nothing except, "I got me a hankerin' for the Territory."

There was a stillness about the place and I figured Pete was still celebrating with the boys in town. The house was empty except for Chang, who cooks for us at a common table in the main room. That, and the small bedroom and office off it, were the only rooms the house could brag about, aside from the kitchen. The place was sparcely furnished, but plenty good enough for bachelor quarters. I'd planned after next year's drive to Abilene to let Nancy use some of the money to fix it up. This year all I had must go into cattle.

CHANG, WHO'D drifted here from laying ties on a railroad, welcomed me with a wide grin and a bob of his head that sent his pigtail suddenly flying. "Drinkee," he said happily and put a bottle and glass down on the long table.

"Thanks." I smiled and dug the special brand of chewing tobacco he liked from Abilene out of my saddle bags. His pleasure was reward for remembering to buy it.

It was late when I heard the boys and Pete hollering and whooping as they rode into the yard. I grinned as I went out to meet them. If ever a bunch deserved a celebration this one did. The boys unsaddled and walked unsteadily to the bunk house, but Pete didn't show he'd had a drink. He almost never did, though he could consume quarts of whiskey.

He sat down on a handmade chair by the fireplace, a short, chunky man who could lick his weight in cougars. Pete wasn't much for talkin', unless he had something to say that added up to a point. He'd been foreman on the ranch in Texas and he'd taken me in hand when I'd been a button and taught me about all I know. It was Pete who picked me up from off my first buckin', sunfishin' bronc, laughing fit to kill as I dusted cactus off my pants. He was older than I by about fifteen years and the best friend a man ever had in this world.

Pete looked at me, studying like, as he rolled a cigarette. "It's true about Nancy and Ash," he said quietly. "Willie was braggin' on it while he lost money at poker as usual." Pete's weather-beaten face tightened. "I'm goin' to

take me a real good poke at that dirty son and that's for sure." He eyed me. "You aim to sit by, Lafe, and let that pretty little gal ruin her life?"

"I can't do anything she doesn't want, Pete. And she wants Ash." I hope I kept the hurt from showing. "I haven't got much to offer Nancy stacked up against old man Merritt and his Bar M."

"You gone loco?" Pete snorted. "That filly was mighty near swoonin' over you, son."

"She's not mighty near swoonin' now," I answered bitterly.

After a minute he changed the subject. "We'd better ride out to the brakes and chase those strays out into the open," he said.

"Yeah," I agreed. We sat over our whiskey watching the fire dance, companionable in our silence.

Pete flipped his cigarette into the fire. "Looks like we'll have us a quiet summer while Merritt'll be busy trying to run out the rest of the little ranchers and tellin' Nancy how to conduct herself and layin' down the law to Bill and Willie." He yawned, stretched and got up. "Night," he said.

"Night," I answered and turned out the kerosene lamp as Pete closed the front door. He'd spoken true, I thought, about what the summer might bring.

Chapter 2

AT DAWN the next day Pete and the boys rode out to hunt for strays and, after breakfast, I hitched up a team to the buckboard, with my own horse tied to the back, and Chang and I drove into Bushwack Creek. I was careful to cut across the range so I wouldn't have to pass Nancy's ranch. I left Chang at the mercantile with a list as long as his arm and tied up at the hitch rail.

The town was some greener and prettier than when I'd left for the trail, the cottonwoods shading the wide dusty street there close by the creek which gave the small clump of buildings its name. I went across to the Last Chance saloon and pushed through the swing doors after I stopped for a friendly word with Sheriff Grainger, who was dozing in a lounger's chair next door in front of his office.

The saloon was empty except for a couple of homesteaders sitting sullen at a table, engrossed in their drinks and low spoken talk. The barkeep, wiping the mirror in back of the long slab of mahogany, turned to me and smiled.

"If you're looking for Spike he's holding a session with Willie Croft." He nodded toward a closed door in the back.

Even as he spoke, the door flew open and Willie came out, pale and shaken. Seeing me, he headed straight for the bar.

"Hiya," he said shortly and ordered a drink that he tossed down like he really needed it.

I watched him and thought what a no good rascal he was. I could understand why Nancy wanted to help her brother, but Willie had got off on the wrong foot when he first started walking. By now he'd cast himself in a pattern of mean shiftlessness that nobody was going to change much. People don't often change down deep. If you're born a weasle, you're apt to die one.

Willie suddenly turned to me and his flabby lips twisted derisively. "Nancy sure showed good sense turning you down, Lafe. I'm pleased. I can use some Merritt money." His eyes shifted to Spike's closed door. "I could use some right now," he said and there was a whine in his voice.

"You're a no good dead beat," I told him contemptuously and I had a hard time not crashing my fist into his weak jaw.

"Why not?" Willie smirked and shrugged. "It don't matter when I got me a real smart sister."

I slammed down the money and walked back to talk to Spike in his of-

fice. If I stayed at the bar I'd not be able to keep my hands off Willie.

Like many straight gamblers, Spike was a power and influence in Bushwack Creek. And sometimes, because of our old, indecisive sheriff, it was Spike who kept law and order in our town. Even the church-going respectable citizens admired the way Spike Halloran was always the first to donate to a worthy cause...

Now, Spike sat at his desk working on some papers and was genuinely glad to see me. His handshake was firm and warm.

We talked about the trail drive and the price of beef, then Spike took his time lighting a cigar, almost a sure sign with him that he had something on his mind. I finished a yarn about a night in Abilene and leaned back waiting.

FINALLY Spike said, "You hear about John Merritt buying the Dulaine spread for nothin'?" Startled, I shook my head and Spike took a deep breath. "Yep. Mrs. Dulaine come down with a bad fever and Doc Randall was out in the hills havin' a baby, so John Merritt jumped in and egged Dulaine into moving his wife back east in a hurry. He swore to Dulaine his missus would die if she didn't take off on the next train. The dirty son!" Spike's jaw was hard. "It liked to scare hell out of the poor young fellow and he took the pittance Merritt offered and high-tailed it back east. That's a right good parcel of land with that big sweet spring and some fat cattle."

I ought to know all about it because the Dulaine place adjoined mine. Then I took plenty of time to build myself a smoke, wanting some of the fiery anger to run out of me. "It sure can't go on like this, Spike," I said slowly. "Someday somebody's got to fight it out with John Merritt."

Spike's hooded eyes brooded on me. "The only reason he's laid off you, Lafe, is your reputation as a fast gun." He leaned toward me. "But now John Merritt owns land on each side of your Split S and something's got to happen soon. Merritt ain't going to let your spread split his holdings down the middle."

I let it simmer in my mind. Not that it took much thinking with a man like Merritt who'd already burned out one ranch on the side of me and just now forced a sale on the other. Of course, nobody had even begun to prove it was Merritt's men who'd burned out Syd Garth, especially with our sheriff laughin' at the idea of Merritt being mixed up in such a dastardly thing. It wasn't that the sheriff was crooked, or Merritt's man, it was simply that Grainger's slow mind couldn't conceive of the big cattle king acting like some warring Comanche. "Rustlers," Sheriff Grainger explained, using again his timeworn excuse. But if rustlers were responsible for all the trouble and killings around Bushwack Creek, they must be hiding in the hills three deep.

John Merritt wasn't only a ruthless man, he had the absolute conviction that all things must work for his own glory. Like it was the Right of Kings, or something. There was no way for a man to talk the thing over reasonably with him. No way, because Merritt simply reared back with angry dignity and refused to discuss matters. It was sufficient that he'd spoken.

I knew as I sat here looking at Spike, that sooner or later Merritt and I would tangle. Someday one of us would lie with his face in the dust while the other walked away, his gun smoking in his hand. Only now they'd say that I'd killed him because his son had taken my girl—and that wasn't the way it was, or the way I wanted it to be.

As I stepped on my cigarette, I wasn't even sure that crafty John Merritt hadn't deliberately encouraged Nancy's marriage to Ash to put me in just this spot. I had a hunch that when he made his play for my spread he'd begin by sneering and telling me no red blooded man would want to hang around where his girl was the wife of another man. The more I thought on it,

the more sure I was that the whole damn reason Merritt hadn't hit the ceiling about Ash's infatuation for Nancy, was because he'd thought he could drive me out easier if they married. I had plenty of water Merritt needed and I was a man who didn't scare.

"TIME TO eat," I said and shoved back my chair. "What was your trouble with Willie?"

"That dirty d e a d b e a t," Spike growled. "I've ordered him to stay out of here until he pays up his poker debts—in full. He's a trouble-maker. He's into me for about a hundred." Cigar ashes spilled on his black broadcloth coat and he brushed them off.

My eyes narrowed in shocked surprise. "But why that much when you know Willie's got nothing?"

Spike looked kind of embarrassed. "Aw hell. Nancy tries so hard and I figured if he was losing in my place he wouldn't be home nagging, or whining around her. It was a way to buy her a little peace." He looked at me and half-smiled.

"I guess I was too dumb to know you love Nancy too," I said quietly and went on out of his office.

I crossed the street to the cafe for noon dinner, dodging between rigs and buckboards. It was then I saw Nancy being helped out of her saddle by Ash in front of the hotel. I watched his slow smile, that women liked, and his deference to her and cold, bitter anger iced through me. Nancy looked so fluttery, like she thought Ash's manner was special and just for her. It wasn't. I'd seen Ash act that same way toward every dance hall girl in town. He could no more help it than some men can help playing poker.

They didn't notice me, so I moved against an upright and watched. There was no mistaking the light in Nancy's dark, soft eyes. She wasn't sacrificing herself for John Merritt's bewitching spell. I got all still inside.

Yet, I couldn't believe that she loved Ash the way she'd loved me. I thought again of the night before I started up the trail to Abilene. We'd ridden out in the moonlight and dismounted by the creek. There Nancy had come into my arms and I'd been exulted by the pent-up passion in her. My own reached out and engulfed her and we were almost lost in the pulsating demand of our love. It was I who pushed her away almost roughly, my body still aching like hell for her.

"I've got to take the herd tomorrow," I said and my voice was ragged. "I want to ask you a big question, Nancy, when I come back."

She came into my arms again, only this time she leaned against me weakly, her hands clinging to me. "I'll wait. Oh, Lafe, I'll wait. But hurry..."

And three months later the same girl was planning to marry another man and the cattle empire he'd someday inherit for her children. I could taste the bitterness in me.

Starting into the hotel she saw me and hesitated, her eyes meeting and steadying on mine. There was a sudden, tense stillness in her that I could feel. Ash turned then and saw me. He put his hand on Nancy's arm and she stopped.

"I heard you were back, Lafe," Ash called and, as he started over to me, his smile was triumphant and mocking. "You goin' to be around to dance at our wedding?"

A group of sunbonneted women passed under the wooden awning, along the planked walk and Ash looked at them with his usual bold admiration. These married women perked up at his attention and almost preened themselves. Ash could do that with a woman no matter what age.

"When is the wedding?" I asked and kept myself from looking at Nancy. She stood so close I could smell the fragrance of her hair and my fingers tightened on my gun belt.

"I haven't decided," she said and when her eyes met mine finally, they held a challenge. "But I thought you

disapproved, Lafe, so you wouldn't be coming?"

"Why should he be a bad loser?" Ash gloated. "All's fair in love and I won you away from him."

Try as I would, I couldn't keep the color from flaming in my face. "You haven't married Nancy yet," I told him harshly. "Maybe you won't."

Ash laughed. "I'm not getting into a fight with you, Lafe. Not unless I have to. I've got what I want." His hand tightened on Nancy's arm.

"HAVE YOU seen Willie, Lafe?" she asked hurriedly. I thought she sounded a little nervous about it.

"He's in town," I answered shortly. I was fed to the eyeballs with this talk. I wanted to get off by myself and nurse my own hurt.

"He's probably in some saloon." Ash grinned. "You know, honey," he bent his sandy head down to Nancy, "your brother's got a whole lot to learn. He's never going to tap Pa for the money he thinks he will. I want you and him and Bill to know that."

She looked real embarrassed and uncomfortable. "Willie's a little spoiled," she admitted apologetically.

There was nothing in this for me, so I turned away again but Ash said, "Pa wants to see you, Lafe. He's coming into town late today, so if you're around look him up."

My jaw tightened. I wasn't taking any orders from the Merritts now, or any time. "If I'm around let your Pa look me up," I said.

"You're rude and impossible!" Nancy cried.

"That I am," I assured her and this time I walked into the cafe for my dinner.

I sat on a stool at the counter and, for some reason, the good hot food tasted like so much hay. I scarcely heard what Marilee said as she dished up the beef stew. Usually we kidded a little and got a few laughs. She was a pretty, jolly girl who took no sass from cowhands.

When I put the money for the meal down on the counter she said, "I'm sure sorry about Nancy, Lafe." Her blue eyes were filled with sympathy. "She's makin' a really big mistake."

"She's the one to decide what she wants," I told Marilee gruffly. "But thanks."

Outside the sun burned down and the street was almost empty, most folks having the sense to stay inside during the noon heat. In an hour or two, the wind would shift and it would be cooler.

I walked toward the mercantile to find out if Chang had loaded up the buckboard, when a kid ran up and handed me a note. It was from Nancy and my hands shook and the words ran together crazily. It's awful what a woman can do to a man.

All she wanted was for me to meet her in the Ladies' Parlor in the hotel. I crumpled it in my fist and walked slowly to where she'd named, not wanting to see her.

It was a lot better for me to take myself out of her life as much as circumstances would allow. She was going to marry Ash and there wasn't anything left over for us. But she'd called me rude and impossible, so I didn't want to give her any real cause for saying that. Reluctantly, I went to the Ladies' Parlor.

NANCY WAS standing at the lace curtained window looking out into the street. When she heard me she turned, her head thrown back. The light was behind her so I couldn't read her expression, but I sensed the nervousness in her.

"Lafe, you've *got* to help me," she said it without any preliminaries. "Willie's in terrible trouble." The words rushed out of her and she was pale. "Spike's called his gambling debts and has demanded immediate payment." She took a step toward me, her eyes so big and soft that my heart damn near turned over. "If I ask Ash for the money he'll think Willie's even

more foolish and irresponsible that he does now. At least," she hesitated and looked miserable, "I ought to be married before I ask him, oughtn't I?"

I felt like shaking her, but instead I worried the black Stetson in my hands. "That's something you got to figure. But why ask *me* for help?" My voice was rough. "You've proved you don't give a hoot about me, so why should I rescue your lazy, no account brother?" The angry hurt burst in me. "I offered him and your Pa jobs before I hit the trail, but they wouldn't turn a hair to *earn* money. Let Willie go to jail and think on his useless life."

"But, Lafe." Nancy choked up and it took a minute before she could go on. I ached to take her in my arms and comfort her, but I didn't have the right. Instead, I kept on worrying my hat. "If Willie goes to jail perhaps Mr. Merritt won't let Ash marry me. Perhaps he won't want a jailbird's sister in his family." She bit her lip, but her eyes kept steady on mine. "Willie doesn't mean any harm, you know that. He's weak, but he isn't a mean man."

I caught her arms and pulled her to me. I looked down into her eyes for a long time. Maybe I was trying to get things a little straight, because right now they weren't making sense to me. "You mean," I said real slow, "you really want *me* to pay Willie's gambling debt to Spike so he won't get thrown in jail? You want *me* to help you marry Ash?"

She pulled away. "I might have known," she said wearily, "that you'd be hard and unfeeling. You couldn't ever be unselfish enough to help me."

"You sound pretty foolish, Nancy," I said. "No girl ought to ask favors from a man she's just jilted."

"She does if she's been silly enough to hope they'd stay friends." Her dark eyes flashed. "Well, I'm going to tell you something, Lafe Saunders. You won't be around here long and I'm glad."

I stared at her and I could feel the cold hard lump in the pit of my stomach. "What do you mean I won't be around long?" I asked quietly.

"I won't tell you," she cried and rushed out of the Ladies' Parlor.

It wasn't exactly hard to figure out. Ash had probably dropped a hint of what his father planned to do if I wouldn't sell out my Split S, or else Nancy had been smart enough to put a few things together and come up with the idea that John Merritt and his bunch of hard riding, hard fighting cowpokes would fight it out with me and my three riders. I had a hunch Ash might have done some bragging and I didn't like it. Most times John Merritt had struck at night so he could blame it on the rustlers. He must be awful sure of himself now if he'd let anybody, even his son, know his plans ahead of time.

I stood there thinking while I rolled a cigarette. No man had the right to ask three other men to side him in a fight like this, with all odds against him. Merritt could throw in maybe thirty men, every last one of 'em wanting to brag that he'd outdrawn me and left me lying dead.

JOHN MERRITT had come into the lobby while I was talking to Nancy, and as usual I had to admire the looks of the man. Tall, slender, with silver hair, cold penetrating eyes and a hawk's regal beak of a nose. He was every inch the dictator. It was in his manner and in the way he moved, it was in the supreme sureness of the man. And it was one of the reasons lesser men quailed before his anger.

Merritt turned now from the desk and saw me. "Hello, Lafe," he said pleasantly and came over to me. It always seemed to me when I talked to Merritt that he resented the fact that I didn't have to look up to him. If anything I had an inch in height on him. "I want to talk to you about buying the Split S," he said it like the deal was already set. "I'm prepared to be generous in my offer, Lafe."

I grinned, though I expect some of

the anger showed through in my eyes at the dirty gall of him. "No sale," I said.

He chuckled. "You could change your mind," he told me quietly enough, but the threat was there.

Since he was making his move for my ranch, there wasn't any use fooling around. "There's something you best understand," I said evenly. "If you or any of your men step a foot on the Split S I'll gun you down. This is your warning."

A flush of anger spread over his lean face, but he laughed. Genuinely laughed, and if he hadn't been a lot older than me, I'd have fought him then and there.

He turned and walked away from me. At the door he called over his shoulder, "No hard feelings, Lafe. We'll expect you at the wedding." There was a sneer in his voice, but I let the jibe lay.

At the mercantile I found Chang had loaded the supplies on the buckboard, but he wasn't anywhere around. Probably he was playing fan-tan with the barber who'd learned the game from Chang, not too well apparently, since my cook always won. Since Chang had stuck close to the ranch all the weeks we were taking the herd to Abilene, I couldn't blame him for wanting a little fun.

Chapter 3

I TOOK MY horse to the livery and suddenly I decided I needed to be alone to try and sort things out. I told myself I was saddle-weary from the long days of riding, but I knew it was my heart that was weary. The loss of Nancy was like a knife sticking in me, one I couldn't pull out. I went back to the hotel and got a room for the rest of the afternoon.

When I stretched out on the bed it felt like I was sinking through it. It wasn't easy to get comfortable, I was so used to sleeping on the ground. But I managed it all right, because it was dusk when I woke up, not having done any thinking at all. I guess it was then I decided I'd stay all night in town and treat myself to a little fun with the boys. Maybe I knew there wouldn't be much time for fun after John Merritt began his fight to drive me out.

I found Chang at the barber shop when I went in for a shave and haircut and told him he could stick around for a while, just so he got back at the ranch by dawn. You'd think I'd given him a hundred dollars gold. Pete would have to rustle up the grub for the boys tonight, but he fancied himself a trail cook and I knew he wouldn't mind. Everybody liked Chang and he was the least bad tempered cook I ever saw.

After supper I drifted into the Last Chance Saloon and found the bar crowded as usual and a few of the little ranchers sitting apart with their drinks at a round table. They welcomed me back and, after a drink or so, I went on to the back room where I could hear the rattle of poker chips. Spike was dealing. Willie wasn't around, so I guess Spike must have put the fear in him. And, suddenly, I didn't feel like poker any more.

Restless, I walked down to the livery to check on my roan. I also had to tell Gus I'd be staying the night. It was in the alley between the harness shop and the stable that I saw Ash with Goldie, one of the newer girls at the Last Chance.

I stopped. Ash's back was toward me, but I'd know Ash any place this side of hell. His arms were around the girl and the kerosene lamp from the livery shone down on her yellow hair and spangled skirt with its low cut bodice. They were so busy with their kissin' neither of them noticed me until I spun Ash around.

"You took my girl," I bit off the

words. "Now you play fair with her."

"You rotten loser!" he shouted. "Keep out of my business." He lunged at me, his face twisted with anger. I ducked inside his blow and caught him with a hard left in the belly that doubled him up. Then I brought up a right hook that landed square on his jaw. It dropped him like he was a sack full of oats.

"Oh!" Goldie gasped and ran out of the alley.

I stood there rubbing my knuckles while Ash slowly got to his feet. He looked at me, then he started laughing.

"My, ain't you something. Why should you be fussin' over Nancy? She doesn't want any part of you." He wiped the blood off his mouth with the back of his hand. "She knows me and what I'm like." He smirked. "She knows damn well I'm not likely to change, but she wants me anyhow. I'm going to tell you something, Lafe. You keep out of my way, or you'll get hurt real bad." He pushed out of the alley and hurried after Goldie.

The trouble was that Ash was right. How he acted with women wasn't any of my business. And Nancy knew his reputation and didn't care.

After I saw my horse put in a stall, I went back to the Last Chance. Most of all I wanted to shut Nancy out of my thoughts. It didn't do a man any good to think on a girl he couldn't have. It was like a cur dog braying at the moon.

Only I couldn't understand how she could shut off her love for me so fast, how she could deny that steady hot flame that burned between us. Bitterness and hurt started gnawing into me again. Even Nancy ought to know a man doesn't change with marriage, not if he chases every pretty woman he doesn't. Ash would be the same tomorrow and ten years from tomorrow. For as long as he lived he'd go home to Nancy from the arms of Goldie or some other busty blonde.

THE POKER game was still going, but I got Spike aside. "I hear you called Willie's debt," I said quietly. "How much exactly does he owe you?"

Spike looked at me real steady before he shook his head. "Love sure makes a man do loco things," he said. "Willie's into me for ninety-eight dollars."

This was a fool thing for me to do and I knew it. "If Willie doesn't come in with the money in a day or two, I'll pay it." I smiled crookedly. "Like you, I'd like to give Nancy a little peace."

"She'll need it, Lafe, if she marries into the Merritt family," Spike said. "God help her."

"Amen," I answered.

Walking to the hotel, I knew I ought to let Willie dig his own grave. Nancy ought to know right now how John Merritt would act about Willie's gambling debts. Only I had to do what she'd asked of me. I loved her.

During the night, when I couldn't sleep, I found out how much a man can ache inside. Deep down inside. I guess a good part of it was knowing that I couldn't offer what Nancy wanted. A sod house, she'd called my adobe. And I, a man too hard and too fast with his guns. Peace and security she wanted, the things she said I couldn't give her.

I pounded my pillow and tried to get my long body comfortable, wishing now I'd hit out for home. The cool night air would have felt good against my face and I wouldn't have felt so shut in with my loneliness. A man like me needed room to breathe and the feel of my big roan under me would be good and companionable.

There was no use lying here the rest of the night turning and twisting, so I got up and pulled on my clothes. Outside there were laughter sounds in the night and the pounding of a tinny piano. A girl's voice shrilled, half excited, half afraid.

I walked fast down to the livery and saddled up. The sky was beginning

to pearl up like it does just before dawn. And I turned my horse across the range.

CHANG WAS angrily rattling pans and muttering when I rode in late morning. I grinned, because this meant somebody had won from him and he'd be moanin' for days to come.

"Where're the boys?" I asked and helped myself to coffee on the stove.

"Out before dawn," Chang grumbled. "Pete he says he find lotta calves."

"I'll eat when it's ready." I went to my room and washed and changed my shirt. When I came out Chang was slapping my dinner down so hard the dishes about bounced.

I was hungry and I wolfed the food, then I leaned back in my chair and lit a cigarette. The sooner I told Pete what John Merritt had threatened, the better. I wanted him and the other boys to have plenty of time to get their pay and ride on.

I saddled up another horse in the corral and set out at a fast gallop. Usually I enjoy riding across toward the gradual rise of hills, which were cut by Bushwhack Creek winding at their base and turning the land greener as it rippled along. Today I scarcely saw my land.

I passed Dulaine's ranch that John Merritt had stolen. The place had an empty dead look. I thumbed back my hat and looked at the corral where horses used to nicker and I wondered how a man must feel who'd used a woman's sickness to frighten a family away and pay them maybe ten cents on the dollar? I knew John Merritt only felt triumph.

Probably by now the little herd of Dulaine's cattle was rebranded with the Bar M; in a little while there'd be no trace left of the Dulaines. I could feel my body tighten as I spurred my horse, because Merritt would have to kill me to take what was mine. I don't scare. I don't run away. And if I had to die, this time John Merritt couldn't blame the rustlers for it, because I'd see that everybody in the whole damn Territory knew he was responsible.

Pete with Chuck and Gunner were lying on the creek bank under the willows, resting through the heat of the day. They got up when I stepped out of the saddle. I didn't waste any time. I told them exactly what John Merritt had said and the hint Nancy had dropped.

"It's too many against us," I said, my hat pulled down low to shade my eyes. "You three'd be smart to draw your pay."

"You talk foolish," Pete growled and the other two agreed. "Thing to do is hire us a couple of gun slingers." He grinned wolfishly. "I know just the right ones."

"Even with two more the odds are all against us," I protested.

Chuck laughed. "Not with your gun, boss. Anyhow, a man's got to die sometime so I'm stickin'."

"Who in hell ain't?" Gunner demanded belligerently.

"Thanks, boys." My voice was husky. I didn't like bringing in hired gunmen, but I had no choice. "How soon can you round up those guns, Pete?"

"Soon's I get to a telegraph office." He looked amused. "You ain't forgot Bejee Ferris and Russ Clary down Texas way, have you?"

My eyes narrowed thinking on those two hard cases. The last thing I wanted was to bring them to the Territory. But John Merritt had made the rules for this game and I was sitting in.

"You better send that telegram from Dalton," I told Pete.

"Why, sure. I'm headin' for there now," he said and saddled up.

He and I left the other two boys to round up more strays and rode at a fast gallop across the range. At the turnoff to Dalton we pulled up. "I wish I didn't have to do this," I said.

"Sure," Pete agreed. "But you got to

have hole cards to stay in this game. I'll be back late tonight."

I watched until he disappeared in the hills, then I turned toward home. From the time I'd got back I'd run head into trouble, heavy trouble.

THE BEAUTIFUL palomino that John Merritt had sent to Nancy was tied in the yard when I rode in. I don't know what could have made me more surprised than to find Nancy in my living quarters talking to Chang.

For a second, I paused just to drink in the prettiness of her in her blue shirt and divided skirt. She looked so *right* in my house.

"Get more coffee, Chang," I ordered and strode to Nancy. She looked up at me from the long table where she'd been having some of Chang's doughnuts. "Why did you come here?" I demanded. "Why can't you leave me be, Nancy, and stick close by the Merritts?"

"Can't you ever be polite?" she flared. Then she must have thought some better of it because she spoke nice. "I came to tell you, Lafe, I'm going to be your neighbor."

My eyes popped in dumb surprise. "You're what!" I said when I could find my voice.

"Mr. Merritt's letting me fix up the Dulaine's house," she spoke saucily.

"But why?" I slapped the dust out of my Stetson against my leg. "So he can sell it to some other dumb rancher?"

Anger flared up in her. "Ash and I might live in it. It's close by the creek and it's pretty land."

"Do you honestly think John Merritt would let you move out from under his roof and his thumb?" I laughed and it sounded harsh. "He don't let anything get away from him."

"I was really fooling," she confessed and, after a moment, she looked away from me. "Ash's uncle's coming out from Boston to live in it, but I'm to fix it real cozy. Please be nice, Lafe; I need your advice."

"Nancy, even you ought to have sense enough to know that John Merritt will give you your orders." I was glad Chang came in with coffee and I drank the strong, hot brew gratefully. "Once you marry Ash you'll have no freedom. You'll take orders from the old man."

"Don't be mean," she said and got up. When she came close to me I could feel the magnetism of her, the tantalizing fragrance of her hair. I could see the quick rise and fall of her firm uptilted breasts. "Don't be mean, Lafe," she whispered.

All the old overpowering love swept through me. All the hunger and the wanting was there in me. Desperately, I wanted to gather her in my arms and carry her into the other room. I wanted to shut out reality and go back to the dream. She wanted me as much as I did her. It was there in the stark hunger in her eyes and in the throb of the pulse in her throat.

I wheeled away from her and went outside. I didn't want her love this way, not unless I could have it forever.

My hands were shaking when I built a cigarette. What had come over Nancy that she could show her desire for me like this when she was marrying Ash on some tomorrow? Nancy had always been an unconscious heartwrecker, but now there was a wantonness in her that had never been there before. I cursed Ash Merritt!

In a little while Nancy came out, her dark eyes were unfathomable. "I'm sorry, Lafe," she said so low I almost couldn't hear her. "I expect you think I'm as bold as some of, of Ash's dance hall girls." She pushed back her bronze hair, but a stray curl fell across her forehead. "I guess it was because I knew this was our good-bye. I'm getting married to Ash next week."

There was no answer I could make.

There was only a stabbing ache in me. Finally I said, "If it's because of what Willie owes Spike, forget it. I've taken care of it."

Her eyes widened. "Thanks, Lafe. Oh, thanks." Then she ran to the palomino and untied him. She rode away from me. There was sweat in the palms of my hands. More than I'd ever wished anything, I wished I'd taken her kiss good-bye.

THAT NIGHT after supper I didn't do anything but sit in front of the fire. I was still there when Pete rode in late, and if he was surprised at finding me just staring into the flames he gave no indication of it.

"Well, I've sent for Beejee and Russ, Boss," he said and poured himself a drink. After he tossed it off, he turned the glass around in his fingers. Finally he blurted, "I got shot at."

I sucked in my breath sharply. "You hit?" I demanded and came out of my chair.

"Naw. The bushwhacker didn't mean it for nothin' but a scare." He poured another drink. "It happened at the creek cutoff. You know that high bank on one side and the trees on the other, and it was real dark and shadowy there. He shot from the high bank."

"So Merritt's starting his move," I said quietly.

"Yep, he's startin'." Pete came closer to me. "Be awfully damn careful, Lafe, because those dirty sons who work for him don't mind ambushin' at all."

"Nor burning out a family, nor lying." My anger almost choked me. "I'm glad we sent for Russ and Beejee. I'll need all the help I can get." I wasn't fooling myself any. I knew I didn't have much of a chance to win this war with Merritt, but I'd take plenty of his men along with me and my burning hope was that I'd take John Merritt along too.

I'M A MAN who doesn't believe in sneaking around, or acting like I'm not mad when I am. So, the next day I rode over to face John Merritt at the Bar M.

As always I was impressed with the mellow beauty of his ranch. The garden was bright with flowers, a lot of whose names I didn't even know. It was stuff John's wife had brought out here to the Territory as a bride a good many years ago. Folks had told me that this garden had been about her only pleasure before she died.

The rambling house was shaded by pepper trees. There'd been els added to the original structure until it looked fine and comfortable. I tied up at the vine covered gallery and walked up the steps and into the house without waiting for anybody to give me any by-your-leave. You might say I was wishin' some of the dirty skunks would try to stop me.

Inside, I stood for a minute looking around at the rugs and furniture that had been rubbed through the years to a soft sheen. It was about the finest looking living quarters I'd ever seen and I felt a cold hard lump in me when I remembered how Nancy had called my place a "sod house." Well, I thought bitterly as I strode down the wide hall to Merritt's office, this was what Nancy had wanted and what she was getting.

I didn't knock, I just jerked open the door. John Merritt was sitting at his rolltop desk studying his ledgers and he looked up in annoyance at the interruption. Seeing me startled him, but you could only tell it from his eyes.

"One of your men shot my foreman last night, Merritt," I said and my eyes bore into his. "Or you did." I walked over to the desk. "One more shot fired at me or any of my men and we start shooting it out wherever we meet any of the Bar M crew." I spoke softly, but he understood me all right.

"Don't be hasty, Lafe," he said. "You're acting like a killer whose fingers itch for his gun." He smiled with his lips. "I don't know what you're talking about. I fight in the open."

I laughed shortly. "Sure," I scoffed. "You never sneak around in the shadows to bushwhack a man, or burn him out." Merritt's face flamed, but he kept quiet. "I came to tell you how things stand between us." I turned on my heel and was at the door when he stopped me.

"Wait a minute, Lafe. Since my son is marrying Nancy I prefer for you not to invite her over to the Split S again." There was steel in his voice now.

Blinding anger drilled through me, but like him, I kept a tight rein on my temper. Merritt was so mad himself that he'd tipped the fact that he was having Nancy watched, so he knew she was at my house yesterday.

"You'd do a hell of a lot better," I drawled, "if you put a watch dog on your son. That way you might keep him away from the dance hall girls." I smiled crookedly. "Or maybe you like the way he acts."

"Get out!" he roared. "And stay off my place."

I closed the door softly behind me. I could hear the old man shouting out the window for one of his men in the yard. The rider must have gone in the house from the back because nobody stopped me when I untied my horse and headed out the lane. I was sorry none of those *hombres* went for his gun!

Riding back to the Split S, I cursed myself for warning Merritt. I suppose there's something in me that wouldn't let me start a shooting war until my enemy knew I was declaring it. I was dead certain Merritt took it as a sign of weakness and no longer considered me a dangerous gun. As I thought on it, his new evaluation of me might be to my advantage. He might even think I was scared and get careless.

Chapter 4

I TOOK the long way home that would go by the Dulaine ranchhouse. It seemed a good idea to look around there on the chance that Dulaine in his hurry had left something behind damaging to Merritt. It was only a wild chance kind of thing, but I had nothin' to lose. I came through the trees and saw the palomino tied to the corral and I spurred my horse.

Inside the house, Nancy was on her knees scrubbing the floor and I stood there in the doorway watching her for a minute. The sun slanted through a window and highlighted the bronze in her hair. It was sure pretty. Today she wore levis and a green shirt, with her gun in its holster on the table. She always wore a gun when she rode all over the range alone to protect herself against what she called "varmints."

"Hello, Nancy," I spoke softly.

She started and spilled over the pail of scrub water. "My, you come quiet," she told me crossly and mopped up the water.

I waited until she finished before I told her about Pete's getting shot at and my ride over to Merritt's. "It was meant as a warning," I said. "Because Pete would be dead if that dirty bushwhacker had really tried."

Nancy looked pale and her eyes were mighty big and sad. "Oh, Lafe, I don't want a war. I don't want guns flaming."

I leaned against the door jamb and rolled a cigarette. "There's one man to blame if it comes, Nancy," I told her. "John Merritt. He's running folks off their land and threatening the rest of us."

"But he's bound to have his own way in the end," she cried. My face must have looked stony hard, because she sighed deeply and carried out the

pail and rags. When she came back she walked to me and put her hand on my arm. "It's better for you to give up and *live,* Lafe. The cattle and land won't matter if you're dead."

I smiled. "A man doesn't run, Nancy. He fights for what's his." And right then I knew I was going to fight for Nancy. I wasn't going to let her marry Ash if I had to tie her up and carry her into the mountains. She was mine and I'd go down fighting for her.

She moved a little closer and her hand tightened on my arm. The kitchen door slammed open and Ash burst in. He stood breathing hard, his face sullen.

"So you had him come here to meet you, Nancy," he accused angrily. "You're willing to marry me, but you still keep Lafe hidin' around the corners. I don't share my women."

I dropped my cigarette and ground it under my foot, then I moved Nancy back against the wall. "Keep your filthy mouth off her," I ordered and there was a red haze in front of my eyes. I wanted to tear Ash to pieces as all my bitterness and anger burst in me.

Ash rushed me, driving his fists into my face and shoving me back against the table that crashed. Nancy's gun thudded to the floor. Ash's heel ground against my left foot and pain shot up my leg. Ash pressed his advantage, his fists flaying my face. There was a faint moan and I knew Nancy was shaken and afraid—for Ash.

Anger spurt through my pain and I bore in on him, backing him slowly against the wall. Savagely I smashed him with my fists, hating him for the things he'd implied about Nancy, the girl he'd stolen from me. My left dug deep into his stomach, blasting the wind out of him. Then I crashed my right into his twisted face.

"Stop!" Nancy yelled and shoved and pulled at me as Ash crumpled and fell heavily to the floor. "You brute!" she sobbed. "You savage!"

I ran a sleeve across my forehead and my breath came in great gulps. Nancy dropped to her knees and began wiping Ash's bloody face. My heart seemed to tear as I watched her because, in a fight like this one, a woman comforts the man she loves, even if he is the one who insulted her. But I was still determined that she wasn't going to ruin her life and mine.

I turned and walked out of the house and rode toward the brakes. Probably Pete and the boys didn't need my help in rounding up strays, but I needed to talk about the ranch and make plans to outsmart Merritt and his gun slicks.

IN THE BRAKES Pete took one look at me and kept close the rest of the day. We found a big bunch of strays and branded them, then we stood around the fire drinking coffee. After that I got my horse and stepped into the saddle.

"Keep your eyes peeled, boys," I told them. "Some of the Bar M crew can be hiding most anywheres."

"Not for long," Gunner bragged.

Pete grinned as he tightened up his cinch. "I'm ridin' along with you, Boss," he said. Sidin' me, I knew, as he had for so long a time.

Sunset flamed up the sky and we rode with our rifles real handy. It wasn't long before the quick twilight came and every shadow, or upthrust of boulder could hide a Bar M gun. Pete and I rode silent, each of us minding our own thoughts.

The Dulaine house was dark in the distance and I guessed Nancy had long since gone home to listen to her Pa brag on her marriage to Ash and Willie whine about his poker losses. I doubted if she'd come again to the Dulaine place to fix it up for the Boston uncle. Orders would come from John Merritt to stay away. But I'd see her and have a real showdown with her.

Pete and I rode through the dark evening shadows. I could feel Nancy's warm, hungry lips against mine and

her body straining closer and closer. I could hear the broken whispers of her love as I held her crushed against me. Desire poured through me, the desperate yearning for her made me sick with longing. I felt she couldn't want me so much and be in love with Ash. I spurred my roan and rode fast through the night.

THE NEXT morning Pete and I were readying logs to build us a new horse corral, when Charlie Wilson came riding into the yard. We both stopped work and went to meet him and I wondered how I could apologize for calling him a liar when he'd told me Nancy was marrying Ash Merritt.

Charlie wiped his forehead with his arm, then sat on his horse looking down at us. "I've always tried to be fair and square with you two," he said. "That's why I came now. John Merritt's offered me a handsome price for my spread and herd."

I didn't like the way Charlie was saying this. There was a kind of defiance in his manner that spelled out that he was hankering to take Merritt's offer.

"Hang on a while, Charlie," I said. "For us to win this war we've got to all stick together."

"There ain't a bit of use bein' stupid, Lafe," he said stubbornly. "Nobody's got a chance against Merritt and all his hired guns. And me, I'm worse off than any of you. My ranch is too far away so's you could help me—even if you could."

"Come on in, Charlie," I urged. "Let's get a drink and cut the dust in our throats."

He got off his horse and tied him to the hitch rail by the kitchen door. The three of us went inside and sat down at the long table with a bottle.

"I sure didn't think you was a quitter, Charlie," Pete drawled.

"Now, you stop that," Charlie blustered. "I just ain't stickin' my neck in line with a gun." He swallowed the whiskey left in his glass and wiped his mustache with his hand. "I got a wife and kids."

Pete looked at me waiting for me to give Charlie an argument. But I couldn't. The odds were against us and it could be if I had a wife and children I'd sell out too. Only I knew I never would. But whether a man stands up and fights for his own land and his future is a thing he's got to decide for himself. We needed Charlie's gun with us, still I couldn't ask a man to face the slim chance we had of winning if he didn't want to make that fight.

"A man's got to live with himself, Charlie," Pete said. "How're you goin' to feel if you quit like a dog?"

Charlie flushed. "You ain't got a wife and kids," he repeated doggedly and I had a hunch Merritt had pounded that into him good. "I only told John I'd think on it. He said he'd help me to make up my mind." For a second Charlie looked scared.

"You think on it," Pete said disgustedly and shoved back his chair. "I got to work."

Charlie got up too and the three of us walked outside. Charlie untied his horse and climbed into the saddle, then he looked down at us. "I don't like to be no quitter, Lafe," he said. "But my family depends on me. I reckon I'll pack up and move on."

I nodded. "A man has to figure it for himself, Charlie," I said. "And one who scares ain't worth much in a fight like this one ahead."

Without a word, Charlie jogged out of the yard. Pete slammed down his ax and it made a deep furrow in the dirt. "Why in hell didn't you *talk* to him?" he asked angrily. "We need every gun we can get."

"Not if the man holdin' it is shaking so hard he can't pull the trigger. Come on, let's fix the fence."

ALL THE time I worked the anger and indignation built up in me.

It was wrong for any one man to frighten other men, to drive them from their homes and the years of backbreaking work that had gone into building them. This Territory had its full share of ruthless men driven by their insatiable ambition. Men blinded to decency, knowing only how to turn and kill. John Merritt was such a man. A merciless man who wanted to be king of the cattle country and who wanted the girl I loved for his son.

In the late afternoon we ran out of nails. It didn't make me feel any better to realize that I'd forgotten to add them to Chang's list.

"Why don't you ride into town, Boss?" Pete suggested and smiled. "It'll kind of steady your temper and you can tie the package on the back of your saddle. You can see if there's word from Beejee and Russ. I told 'em to send it to Bushwhack Creek."

"All right," I agreed. The message would be cryptic, so's only Pete and me would know what it meant. And the long ride might help settle my mind.

After supper I headed for town. The roan ate up the miles with his steady lope and I tried to figure out the best way for us to fight John Merritt and save our homes and herds. This fight was for my own land and my own way of life. No man had the right to shove me aside and take from me what was my own.

My hand tightened on the reins. And no man had the right to take the woman I loved.

The stars were out and the moon was slowly rising as I rode. It was a lovely peaceful land tonight where each man should have the right to carve his own destiny. No ruthless vulture could spread his destruction over this peaceful valley and make it run red with the blood of men.

It was about a mile outside of town that I heard horses galloping behind me. I turned in the saddle, my gun ready. I stared into the moonlight, every sense alert. Gradually I relaxed, a little ashamed of my tenseness. Plenty of cowhands and ranchers rode in for a night's howling and the riders behind me probably were friends.

As I rode abreast of an outcrop of rock at the turn in the road, a man stepped in front of me. My horse reared with his shouted, "Throw down your guns!"

The riders behind me caught up and there was a whirr as a rope settled over my shoulders and jerked my arms tight to my sides. There were three of them and they wore their neckerchiefs over the lower part of their faces with their hats pulled down low.

Nobody spoke. The man with the rope yanked me off my horse and I landed with a hard jar in the dusty road. I was stunned for a moment. Then my head cleared and I knew what they meant to do. I was to be dragged across the range to a slow and brutal death.

I HAD BEEN careless, so careless that I hadn't even killed the man who'd jumped in front of me. And that split second had settled the issue.

"You got somethin' to say?" one of them asked me as he tied the rope to his saddle.

"Only that John Merritt hasn't the guts to face me with this fight like a man," I said, half choking on the dust in my mouth and nostrils. Laughter was my only answer.

The rope tightened and there was nothing I could do against its biting hold, except hope it wouldn't be too long before I lost consciousness. There was no way I could get free. Then the rider spurred his horse and he leaped forward, bouncing my body over the rocks. I shut my eyes to keep out the dirt. There was the taste of blood in my mouth.

All the riders were whooping it up and we lit out across the range, my body twisting and dragging at the end

of that rope. For a while I tried desperately to keep my face off the ground, but a sudden jerk almost broke my neck. I don't know when I gave up, but even the pain became a blurred mass of hurt.

How long it lasted I don't know. Suddenly I half realized that I was no longer being dragged. My body was six feet one of battered ache and bruises. It took a long time, but I finally managed to sit up. They'd untied me and left me lying near the creek. Hate blazed in me so hard it gave me the strength to crawl to the water. It took a long time, but I made it.

It was cool against my raw, hurting face. There wasn't an inch of me that didn't hurt, but the water finally revived me and I could think again. I knew my horse would go on back to the ranch and then Pete would come looking for me. Right now there was no way in hell I could go after those dirty sons!

Finally, I climbed to my feet and shut my eyes against the sudden dizziness. I suppose I'd have given half my spread right then for the makings to roll a cigarette. In the moonlight I saw my pants were torn and filthy and my shirt was in bloody shreds. My guns were long since gone.

The toughest thing I had to do was to fight my wild impatience to find the men who'd done this. The hate in me tasted bitter in my mouth. The important thing now was to control my cold fury, I told myself, so I could get some place for help. I looked around trying to get my bearings. I saw the small cluster of lights to the left of me and I figured it had to be Bushwhack Creek.

I staggered as I set out for those lights. I fell and pulled myself up and fell again. Then I steadied out and thought of nothing but the lights of Buckwhack Creek.

IT TOOK what seemed a life time to me, but I made it. Folks stared at me as I lurched along, heading for the barber shop and a hot tub of water and a glass full of whiskey. My knees were pretty shaky, but I was a lot better than when I started.

I felt Sam's strong arms helping me inside his barbershop and when I tried to grin my raw face hurt bad.

"Lord," Sam whispered. "They must have dragged you."

"Yep," I answered and sank down on a chair, suddenly dizzy again now that I'd made it. "But they'll wish they hadn't," I swore.

The whiskey and the hot water helped a mighty, so did the ointment Sam rubbed on me. Then I sent him to the Last Chance to get a shirt from Spike.

Spike came back with him and he took one look at me and cursed maybe for five minutes. I grinned at him and it didn't hurt bad now. When I'd told him about my own stupid carelessness and how it happened I said, "Those *hombres* will wish to hell they'd never been born." I took another long drink. "One thing though, Spike, it shows John Merritt's uneasy."

"He meant for those men to kill you, Lafe," Spike said.

"I expect. And maybe they thought they had." I put on the clean shirt and pants Spike had brought. "Keep your ears open around your bar because one of them will surely brag about what they did tonight. Merritt's responsible, but I'm still going to get the skunk who threw that rope on me and then dragged me to the devil and gone again."

"You need sleep," Spike told me. "I'll pick you up a gun and a bottle at the saloon. You go find a bed at the hotel."

Spike made it about as soon as I did and it felt considerably more comfortable having a gun on again. Spike went on back to the Last Chance and I pulled myself up the stairs to my room, after leaving word for Pete to come right up when he rode in.

About four hours later Pete's knocking woke me up. The roan had got back to the ranch all right, he told me, and he'd set right out with another horse to find me. He tracked me back to where the three riders had jumped me and the signs were plain in the moonlight as to what had happened.

Pete's face was hard like flint. "I'm going to kill John Merritt," he said evenly and the only expression was in the cold depths of his eyes.

"No," I ordered. "He's mine. After tonight I owe him killing." But I knew if Pete got to Merritt first he'd shoot it out and I knew Pete had to be stopped.

"*I* want Merritt and that's an order," I said and finally I got Pete's promise to let me handle it. Then he slammed out of the room and I knew he'd sit in the Last Chance over a bottle for the rest of the night and nurse his anger that I wouldn't let him light out for the Bar M.

Chapter 5

AFTER a hearty breakfast, I still felt like a piece of raw beef and every muscle in me was aching sore. But I could get around without too much trouble and my trigger finger was working. The first thing I did was buy two black handled six guns and a belt. I took plenty of time picking them out and I got two that were finely balanced and felt good in my hands. Then I bought all the bullets the mercantile had in stock and tied them in my saddle roll.

Pete and I headed for the Split S, and he was grim faced. At the turnoff for Nancy's Rocking C I left Pete and galloped on alone. I found myself urging my horse faster and faster in my eagerness to see her.

This time when Nancy heard me she ran out of the house and down the steps to meet me, her face strained with worry.

"Oh, Lafe, Lafe!" she cried and looked up at me for a long time before she turned her eyes away. "It's all over that you were dragged."

I swung out of the saddle and took her by the shoulders. "Have you had enough of the Merritts?" I asked harshly. "You're never going to marry Ash. That I promise you." Her eyes were two dark pools, whose expression I couldn't read. "Even," I said flatly, "if I have to kill him."

"I've explained it all to you, Lafe." She bit her lip, then went on. "You know how I feel."

I brushed aside her words. "You're only infatuated by his name and the future you think he offers you." My hands tightened on her shoulders. "It's no good, Nancy. None of it. It spells out heartbreak for you." I tilted up her chin so she couldn't look away. "You never told me the real reason why you said you'd marry Ash while I was on the trail," I said softly.

She half smiled. "He's charming. Ask any girl in town."

"What else?" I insisted.

She drew in a long breath. "Someone will tell you, so I will. John Merritt bought the mortgage on this place from the bank."

I felt myself tighten up. "How much, Nancy?"

"Almost two thousand," she whispered.

I winced. I had that much from the sale of my cattle in Abilene, money I needed to rebuild my herd. But Merritt could hold that mortgage over Nancy and force her to do almost anything he wanted. She loved this place and there wasn't much she wouldn't do to save it for her father and brother. I suppose she remembered how hard her mother had worked for it.

"I'll get you the money to buy Merritt off," I told her. "Is that the main

reason you said you'd marry Ash?" I had to know.

"It was the reason I first let him come courting, then he was so charming I guess I fell in love." After a minute she said, "But even if you lent me the money Mr. Merritt wouldn't take it. He told me nobody could ever buy it from him."

I fought down the hot anger that spilled through me. "You tell Merritt I said he'd let you buy back that mortgage. You tell him I said he won't live long enough to have it mean anything to him if he doesn't." My hands dropped to my guns.

"But there's Pa and Willie," she began uncertainly.

"To hell with both of them," I told her curtly. "It's you I'm thinking of, Nancy. Your life." My eyes held hers. "You're going to marry me just as we planned it. Because you don't really love Ash, you love me, just the way you did that night in the moonlight."

I reached for her. She stiffened against me, then with a little cry she came into my arms. Her lips clung to mine, eager and hungry and the desire and passion in me flamed her on. We belonged together for as long as we both should live.

I carried her into the house and kicked the door closed behind us.

WHEN I FINALLY reached my ranch, Pete had word from Beejee and Russ that they were on their way and a note that Spike had sent out. The note simply said that Gar Mitchell, the foreman of the Bar M, had been the one who'd dragged me.

Without a word, we both checked our guns and strode out of the house to the corral. We saddled up and rode out of the yard. I was glad Pete was beside me.

I guess we were about halfway to the Bar M when we saw a rider coming toward us at breakneck speed. We pulled up and I swore under my breath when I recognized Willie Croft. Pete spat in disgust.

He was red faced and flustered when he came to a stop. "I, I was comin' to your place, Lafe. I, I want to fight on your side against the Merritts."

"Why?" Pete said flatly.

Willie glanced at him, then he looked back at me. "Ash treats me like a slob," he shrilled his protest. "Like I ain't got feelings. I don't like you much, Lafe, and you don't like me, but you always treated like I'm human." He wiped his flabby mouth with the back of his hand. "I know I ain't much good, but Nancy's always been good to me and I can't let her marry Ash."

"You liked it fine," I reminded him and held onto my temper. It wasn't easy when I remembered how smug this no good shiftless man had been when he'd thought Ash would hand out money to him.

"I know," he admitted eagerly. "But I seen how mean Ash and his Pa are. I don't want Nancy hurt real bad. At first I urged her to marry him. I told her how much better it'd be for Pa. It won't. And I don't want her miserable," his voice trailed off. When neither Pete nor I said anything, Willie's face got more troubled. "And I thank you kindly for settling my debt to Spike. Oh, I know it was for Nancy, but I thank you just the same." He turned to Pete. "Please let me ride with you. I ain't as bad with a gun as you might think."

Pete just shrugged and left it up to me. This could be a smart move on John Merritt's part to get a spy on my payroll. I didn't trust Willie as far as I could toss him, though right now he seemed honest enough.

"We're riding to the Bar M," I told him. "I'm hunting Gar Mitchell."

Willie looked scared to death and he had to wet his dry lips and swallow before he could speak. "I'll trail along," he said. "A man like me's got

to get used to standing on his two feet," he added with surprising dignity.

The three of us hit across the range. Pete and I got off our horses in the Bar M yard and I strode to the bunkhouse. I knew Pete's gun would be ready. Willie I didn't know about, but Pete would take care of him if he tried a doublecross.

I called, "Gar"

After a minute he answered, "Yep."

"I'm waiting for you to come out. And in case you don't recognize the voice, it's Lafe Saunders." I backed up a little, my hands ready at my sides.

GAR WAS a burly man, but when he came out he looked curiously shrunken. Sweat lined his upper lip and he wiped his hands along the sides of his pants.

"I'm not fast with a gun like you," he said.

"Then you were a fool to drag me."

I let him reach his gun before I started my draw. I shot him through the heart while his gun was half way out of its holster.

Some of the other Bar M men crowded through the bunkhouse door. They stared down at Gar Mitchell lying crumpled in the dust. Nobody moved.

"Any of you want to make something of it?" I asked softly.

Nobody did.

John Merritt came down off the gallery, his face hard and his eyes blazing. "You dirty killer," he shouted at me.

"He almost dragged me to death last night. He had it coming." My eyes bore into his. "Let's settle it now, Merritt. Go for your gun." He backed away, his arms almost straight out at his sides. "You yellow coward," I said and all the hate was in my voice. "You act high and mighty and you're only a yellow bully hiding behind your hired guns." I motioned to Pete and we swung up on our horses.

Willie got on his and John Merritt noticed him. "Where're you going?" he asked contemptuously.

"With, with Lafe," Willie stammered and his fear was naked. "I work for him now."

Merritt's laughter followed us as we rode out of his yard. But I thought there was a hollow sound in it. The sound of a man shown up as a coward before the men he hired to do his fighting for him.

After supper I walked around the house, restless. It was Nancy who worried me. Willie wasn't worth much, but I thought he was genuinely upset about his sister marrying Ash. All I could hope was that her love for me would make her follow her heart.

THE BOYS weren't too pleased about having Willie around, but he acted so grateful they managed to tolerate him. At least, he could make a fourth at poker, Pete said.

After breakfast, Willie rode with the boys to the brakes to hunt for more strays and I went to work on the corral. I was still busy when they all came back that evening and Bill Croft followed them with Willie's gear.

I took the stuff and dumped it in the bunkhouse, but Bill didn't seem in any hurry. Finally I asked, "You got something on your mind?"

"Nancy. Ash's not going to make her a good husband. And John struts around like he's king or something, treating the rest of us like dirt under his feet." He looked at me. "Lafe, you got to stop her marrying Ash."

"I will," I promised and he let out a long breath.

Bill turned and looked around at my neat outbuildings. "I never was much at ranching." He sounded sad. "Not since Nancy's ma died anyhow." He leaned against a tree and slowly rolled a cigarette. "I used to be in a medicine show." He smiled. "I was

good. We came to the town back east where my wife lived and we fell in love. But she wanted me to quit and head west to build a new life." He looked around again. "It never quite worked out."

For the first time since I'd known him, I realized that Bill had tried to do something for the women he'd loved that he wasn't cut out for. Probably if he'd stayed with that medicine show he'd have been a happy man and a lot more successful than he was as a rancher. Theatricals were beginning to come into the Territory and maybe Bill could get a job with one of them. It was something to think about.

"Don't worry about Nancy," I said. "I'm going to try to take care of her."

"Thanks," he said and there were tears in his eyes.

"Boss! Boss!" Chang yelled. "Lookee sky!"

There was a red glow biting into the evening sky in the direction of Nancy's place. I shouted to Pete and the boys and we all raced for our horses.

By the time we reached the ranch house it was an inferno. She was in the yard, her face white with fury. When she saw us and her father, she ran to me.

For a moment, she buried her face against my chest and I held her gently. "What happened?" I asked, though I thought I knew the answer.

Nancy lifted her face. "I rode into town this morning and I saw Ash's horse tied in front of the hotel. I went up to his regular room to ask him to come down to the Ladies' Parlor for a talk." Her eyes were steady. "Gloria was there. I apologized for bothering them, but I'd come to tell Ash I couldn't marry him." She must have felt the sudden hammering of my heart. "Ash told me nobody walks out on a Merritt, much less the girl he'd planned to marry. He said he'd teach me I couldn't walk out on him." She looked at the flaming ruins of her home and tears ran down her cheeks.

"And he had his men do this," I said bitterly. This was the showdown. This was the day I killed the Merritts.

I moved away from Nancy and got on my horse.

"Wait!" she cried. "Pa and I ride with you."

There was no use arguing with her. And this was her business too. I noticed that while she always toted a gun, this evening she wore two. Her spirit made me proud.

It hit me as we galloped fast. Nancy had gone to tell Ash she couldn't marry him! She'd found out that she belonged to me just as I did to her. And my heart sang again.

A BUNCH of the Bar M boys were lounging outside the bunkhouse, but Pete and my riders got the drop on them before they quite knew what was happening.

"Stay with 'em," I told Bill and strode inside the big rambling house.

Ash and John Merritt were in the office. I jerked Ash to his feet. "I knew you were a low skunk, but I didn't think even you'd be low enough to fight a woman by burning her out." I slapped him with my open hand. I slapped him until he staggered and begged for mercy.

"I've been waiting for this," John Merritt shouted. "I'm going to kill you, Lafe."

"Drop your gun, Mr. Merritt," Nancy ordered coldly and climbed in the window behind him. His gun fell out of his hand and thudded on the floor.

I jerked Ash to his feet and handed him his father's gun. "Use it," I said. "Because I'm going to kill you."

"No!" he yelped and threw the gun across the office.

"I'll do what you want, Lafe," John Merritt said and sank down in his chair like a tired broken old man. "Anything you want, only don't kill my son."

The things I wanted were Nancy's mortgage, her house rebuilt and peace in the valley. Merritt wearily walked to his safe and handed her the paper.

"She'll pay it up when she can," I told him.

"It doesn't matter. My men will start work on your house tomorrow, Nancy," he said and his speech was thick. "I'll live in peace with my neighbors, Lafe." He looked at Ash and his face twisted in contempt. "I tried to build an empire for him, even though I knew he wasn't worth it. I thought if I could drive strong men like you out, Lafe, I could make it safe for Ash." He shook his head. "I couldn't. There's nothing he ever wants but a new pretty face." He turned to Nancy. "I'm sorry. I hoped you could change him. Nobody ever could."

"We'll have a meeting with all the ranchers, Merritt," I said. "And you will guarantee the peace."

"Whatever you say." He put his face in his hands.

I don't think either he or Ash knew when Nancy and I walked out.

"It's settled," I told Pete and the others. "There'll be peace. And, Bill, Merritt's rebuilding for you." I helped Nancy into the saddle. "You and Bill and Willie can stay at my place until yours is ready."

"Thanks," she said softly.

IT WAS AFTER a cold supper and the others had gone to bed, that Nancy and I were alone. The fire burned brightly and danced in her copper hair.

She came to me and put her hands on my arms. "I was terribly wrong, Lafe. Our children will have real security because you are a strong man. I want my man to fight for what belongs to him. I want to build our future together."

"You're sure of your own heart now?" I asked softly.

"So sure," she answered. "I was blinded by another woman's garden and the sheen of her furniture. I was charmed by a weak man's smile and promises." Her fingers bit into my arm. "Always it was you who filled my heart, who made me come alive. Please, Lafe, will you have me now?"

My laugh was exuberant. "You're nothing but a gun totin' heartwrecker," I teased. Even as I said it I knew that someday she'd lay her gun aside to cradle her babies.

I'd lay mine aside too, now that the valley was peaceful. Now that men didn't fear shadows in the dark and the blaze of burning homes. Now that John Merritt would send his gunmen away and lay down his dream of empire.

A piece of log broke sending sparks shooting high. I drew Nancy into my arms and her kiss promised everything a man would want for as long as he might live.

THE END

The whole town knew about it before Loretta! But she wasn't the sort of girl to sit around and break her heart. Don't miss this thrilling romance about a

Girl With Ideas

You'll find it featured in the big June issue of

GAY LOVE STORIES

Now on sale at all stands

THEY CALLED HIM SADDLE TRAMP

What does a girl do when she falls in love with an outlaw?

I'VE LOVED Dan Spencer since the first day I saw him. That was way back in our school days, so you can see it's been a long time. He was a cute little boy, but when he grew to manhood he was enough to make even the most dyed-in-the-wool old maid look twice. He stood over six feet tall, with broad, thick shoulders and slim hips; he had black, curly hair and classic features and the nicest set of blue eyes you ever saw. But, girls didn't seem to mean anything to him.

You see, Dan was an orphan and none of us will ever know what he'd had to do to put himself through school. He did it though, with no parents to look after him and no one to care whether he lived or died; somehow he earned enough to feed and clothe himself, and he graduated from that little Texas school after many others who had parents and advantages dropped out.

The education didn't do him much good though. He was a nobody and the

only job he could get was that of hostler in the livery stable.

I had grown up in entirely different circumstances. My father owned the biggest saloon and gambling hall in Faro, Texas; and, while a lot of the "nice" people looked down their noses at us we were as well-to-do as any of them and a lot better off than most. I had led a more or less sheltered life, it being father's ambition to send me to a finishing school back east so I would become a lady and marry a rich gentleman. And, that was the way of it that summer day that I went to the livery stable to get my horse and go for a ride. I was going east in a few weeks and it was one of my last chances to breathe the clean, invigorating air and see the beautiful country that is my beloved Texas.

Dan was measuring out oats when I came into the barn, and I asked him to saddle my pinto. He nodded slightly and went to do my bidding. All of the girls in school had tried to attract Dan by whatever means they could, but he had ignored us all. I had been the worst of all, but even though we had gone through school together we barely had a speaking acquaintanceship.

He led the pony from the stall a few minutes later and I was quite surprised as I swung into the saddle to hear him say, "You're not going riding alone, Miss Gloria?"

Texas was frontier country in those days and ordinarily I wouldn't have gone alone. But my friends were all busy and it was one of my last chances to go riding. I nodded.

"But, Miss Gloria," he protested, "it isn't safe!"

I don't know what got into me. Perhaps it was because I knew that it was my last chance to make him aware of me, or it might have been my hopeless desire expressing itself. Anyhow, I said, "Why don't you come with me?"

He looked at me in astonishment. Then I saw the automatic refusal in his eyes slowly change to thoughtfulness and then a reckless, devil-may-care glint. He grinned. "All right. Give me a minute to saddle up."

As he turned and hurried into the row of stalls I felt my face redden in shame. I had done a very brazen thing and I wanted to call after him and say that I had changed my mind. But I didn't quite dare, and so, feeling very cheap, I sat the pinto, waiting.

Presently he led a magnificent bay stallion from the stalls and wordlessly I walked the pinto out of the barn. Outside, Dan swung into the saddle and grinned at me. "Lead the way!"

Feeling very self-conscious and brazen I spurred the pony and he fell in beside me on the bay.

IT WAS A lovely summer day. The prairie sun was bright and golden and there was just enough breeze to keep it from getting hot. It was mid-summer, just before everything began to ripen and turn brown and I couldn't think of anything more wonderful than riding beside the man I loved across the Texas countryside.

On the outskirts of town we urged the ponies to a lope then a gallop, and before we knew it we were racing across the prairie, laughing like two school children playing hookey. Presently we pulled up by Beaver Creek to breathe the horses and Dan helped me to dismount. Leaving the horses ground-reined we sat on the bank and stared into the lazy blue water.

"They tell me you're going east to one of those fancy schools," Dan said, after a short awkward silence.

I nodded. "Father wants me to become a lady and marry a rich banker or something."

"I hope you do," he said and looked moodily away.

I felt a pang of disappointment at his words. "What about you?" I asked, trying to keep him talking. "You're not going to keep working in that barn, are you?"

He shrugged his shoulders and a bitter grin twisted his lips. "They won't hire me for anything else."

"That's a shame!" I exclaimed. And it was, because he'd been the smartest boy in school. "But you keep trying and one of these days you'll be the most successful man in the state."

"Fat chance!" he murmured bitterly. "I'm nobody and they won't let me show them what I can do. I've got a good mind to quit my job and ride the Owlhoot Trail!"

"Dan!" I said in horror. "What are you saying? What a dreadful thing to even consider. Don't ever let me hear you say that again!"

He looked at me a moment and then laughed. I realized that in two more weeks I would be leaving and I'd probably never see him again.

My face reddened, but I said, "I'm serious, Dan. I may be going away, but we don't have to lose touch with each other. You'll write to me, won't you?"

"You'll have plenty of letters to answer without taking time to answer mine," he said.

"Please, Dan," I said. "I'd love to have you write. And I promise to answer every letter I get within two days."

It was his turn to be embarrassed and he looked away. "Of course, I'll write," he said.

"That's fine," I said, feeling my heart sing. "And we'll have no more talk about the Owlhoot Trail."

He grinned sheepishly. "No. I don't really mean it; it's just that when things get me down it seems like an easy way out of my troubles."

If he had spoken the thought, he must have turned it over in his mind. Perhaps I could speak to father and get him a job with a future. That would end this Outlaw Trail business once and for all. He was too intelligent to really consider the impulse, but something in this low ebb of his affairs might force him to the trail and then it would be too late to turn back.

"Come on," I said, gaily, climbing to my feet. "It's getting late and I've got to get back."

He grinned, something he seldom did and followed me to the horses. He helped me mount, swung into his saddle and we spurred the mustangs homeward.

I WAS SURPRISED as we drew up by the livery stable to find father waiting for me.

"Father," I asked, "is something wrong?"

"You bet there is, young lady," he said, angrily. "Go home. I'll talk to you later!"

He swung on Dan and I suddenly realized that he was angry because Dan had gone riding with me. "Wait a minute, father," I said. "It—"

Father turned angrily back to me. "I said *go home,*" he snapped, "and I mean *right now!*"

"Do as he says, Gloria," Dan said. "I don't want you to get into any more trouble because of me." There was a peculiar set to Dan's lips and his face was white.

I had never disobeyed father before, and Dan had asked me to obey him. I dismounted and went home. But anger kept rising within me as I thought of what had happened. How dare father make a scene because I had gone riding with Dan and what right did he have to select my friends?

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became. I went into the living room and began pacing its length until I heard father come into the house. I confronted him in the doorway of the living room.

Father was more angry than he had been at the stable. "Young lady," he said, "I don't want to see you with that saddle tramp again!"

"You have no right to tell me whom my friends will be, and furthermore Dan is not a saddle tramp!"

"He is right now!" Father said, maliciously. "I spoke to his boss and he's been fired. And what's more I'll see that he doesn't get another job on this range."

"Father!" The implications of father's actions struck me all at once and my knees went weak. "You didn't!"

"I certainly did!" Father exclaimed. "I'll teach him to go riding with my daughter!"

I brushed by him and hurried along the hall.

"Where are you going?" father called.

"To see Dan!" I shouted.

"Gloria, come back here!"

I paid no attention to him. I put my hand on the doorknob and he spoke in a very quiet voice.

"If you go out that door, don't ever come back!"

I was too angry to consider his words, but if I'd had a year to think them over I would have done the same thing. I opened the door and slammed it shut behind me.

Outside, I leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. I was upset, but not too upset to realize what I had just done. Father would reconsider in a short time, I knew, but I had made my choice and I would stick to it. My decision was influenced by my love for Dan, and this, I thought to myself, was the opportunity to show him how much I loved him. When he saw what I had done for him he would ask me to marry him, and then I could help him attain the heights of success of which I knew he was capable.

I hurried to the livery stable, but Dan wasn't there. Mose Haskins, the owner, told me that he'd paid him off and that Dan had headed for home.

Dan had built himself a cabin on the outskirts of town. I made my way there, picturing to myself the look of surprised pleasure on his face when he saw me...

BUT THE cabin was empty, and the look of it told me that Dan had taken everything he wanted and left for good. I sat down in a chair. Where would he go? Father had said he'd see that Dan wouldn't get another job on this range.

Suddenly I knew in a flash of knowledge. Dan had gone to the Owlhoot! Actually he'd had no choice since he couldn't get work. *And it was all my fault!*

My eyes filled with tears. Poor Dan! Once he made his first foray on the outlaw trail he could never turn back. He would be doomed to ride that bloody path until a lawman's bullet or rope sent him to an unmarked grave. *And it was all my fault!* If it hadn't been for me he could have worked at the livery stable until he'd gotten a break...

The tears rolled down my cheeks for a time. Then I made up my mind. If I were responsible for his predicament perhaps I could get him out of it. He didn't have much of a start.

I stood up and went to the mirror and studied myself. There was a pair of shears on the table, and I picked them up and cut off my long golden curls. I was dressed in men's riding clothes, and there was an old hat hanging from a peg. I put on the hat and saw that with my slight figure in the heavy clothes I looked like a boy.

I knew then what I was going to do. I lay down in the bunk and waited until dark. After nightfall I made my way to the livery. I waited until Mose Haskins went to supper then got my saddle and bridle. My pinto was as tame as a kitten. I led him from a stall, saddled him then mounted and urged him out of the barn into the darkness. In a short time I was out of town.

As you know the Owlhoot Trail is really a lot of little-used trails that extend between the Rio Grande River and the Canadian Border. I knew where one of the trails went through our range and I rode into the badlands until I found it. I offsaddled there, picketed my horse and made my bed in a thicket of thorns.

Next morning I cooked breakfast with some of the few supplies Dan had left in the cabin, saddled and started along the trail. I figured Dan had only a little start on me so that if I hurried I might catch him. I sent the pinto hurrying along the trail until he was lathered with sweat and I had to pull him in.

I halted by a clump a manzanita and pushed the hat back on my head. Suddenly a voice said, "Posse after you, son?"

I jumped and wheeled. A grizzled old outlaw sat his horse in the manzanita. His cold eyes studied me.

"No," I said, trying to make my voice sound masculine. "I want to catch up with my brother. Have you seen him?" And I described Dan.

He studied me a while longer, then said, "Yeah. He's heading toward Canada. You're going the wrong way."

Now Dan had that much more start on me. I thanked the outlaw and sent my horse back along the trail.

I traveled all that day and the next without catching up to Dan. Occasionally I'd meet and owlhoot who'd study me from the concealment he'd taken when he heard me coming and tell me that Dan was a few hours ahead of me. And each time I heard the encouraging words I'd spur the pinto that much faster.

BUT IT WAS evening of the third day when I caught up with him. Shortly after nightfall I came around a bend and saw several figures around a fire. They all melted into the darkness when they became aware of me, but came out as soon as they saw that I was alone and no danger to them.

Dan was off by himself and I dismounted and went to him, through the men who apparently paid no attention to me. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground looking moodily at nothing. I stopped before him and said, "Hello, Dan."

He jerked his head up and stared at the sound of my voice. "Gloria!" he exclaimed.

As he said my name I felt the nearest outlaw stare at me. I didn't pay any attention to him because I was so happy to have caught up with Dan.

Dan got to his feet. "Are you crazy?" he said, "Coming here! You ought to have the seat of your pants warmed!"

"Who's going to warm them, Dan, you?" I asked, my eyes twinkling.

"No," he said firmly, "but I *am* going to take you home."

"I have no home," I replied. "Father told me if I went after you never to come back."

"He was just talking. He'll be so relieved to see you he'll welcome you with open arms."

"But I don't want to go home!" I exclaimed.

"There's no place for you on the Owlhoot Trail, Gloria!" Dan said, firmly. "Are you forgetting they call me a saddle tramp? I'll go saddle my horse and take you back." He turned to go.

Disappointment was like a knife within me. I had expected a completely different reception from the one I got. Apparently Dan wasn't even glad to see me. And I had given up everything for him!

Tears welled in my eyes and I called to him. "Never mind, Dan. I've gotten this far without your help, and I can take care of myself the rest of the way. I never want to see you again!"

Dan turned surprised eyes on me. He opened his mouth to protest, but I paid no attention. I rushed to the pinto and

scrambled into the saddle. Putting spurs to him, I galloped into the night.

I don't know how far I went before the pony slowed, and I didn't care. What was I going to do now? Dan didn't care about me. His reception had made that obvious. Must I go crawling home to father and confess what I had done? I shuddered at what he would say, and perhaps he wouldn't want me back. I had made a complete fool of myself.

At that moment a horse stepped into the trail ahead of me and I could feel a pair of eyes studying me. I knew instantly that it was the owlhoot back at the camp who'd heard Dan call me by name!

THE SUDDEN fear in me turned to panic. I whirled my horse, but it was too late. The rangy gelding the outlaw rode was beside me in two strides. A strong arm went around me and evil-smelling lips found my own. I struggled, but it was no use. When the outlaw finished his kiss, I struck him with all the force I could muster across the face.

He only laughed. "A little hell cat." ain't you," he leered. "I like 'em with spirit."

He pulled a pigging string from his saddle and in a moment my hands were securely trussed behind my back. Taking the reins of the pinto, he rode into the darkness.

I don't know how far we went. The fear within me became an enormous thing until it almost paralyzed me. The only person who might help me was Dan, and the way I had left him I doubted if he would bother to follow. And even if he did, how could he even find us in the darkness.

After what seemed a short time, although in reality we had traveled some distance, the owlhoot pulled up in a small meadow. He dismounted and came back to me. "Here we are, sweetheart," he said. "This is where we'll have our honeymoon!"

He must have seen the fear in my eyes by the faint light of the moon, for he laughed. "Come on," he said, "get down. I ain't such a bad hombre. You'll get to like me real well."

When I made no move to obey, he reached up and pulled me from the saddle. I struck the ground hard and lay there, afraid to move.

The owlhoot took the saddles from the horses and picketed them. Then he took the blankets from the rolls and spread them on the ground. Finished, he turned impatiently toward me. "I'm all ready, sweetheart," he said, a leer in his voice. He started toward me, and I struggled desperately against the bonds that held my wrists.

"Then say your prayers!" a soft voice said.

I couldn't believe my ears. I turned my head and there, limned against the trees, was Dan.

The owlhoot was as surprised as I. He stared at Dan, then said smoothly, "Hello, kid. I didn't think you wanted her. If I'd known, I'd have left her for you."

As he spoke, the owlhoot was moving slowly in a half circle. And suddenly I knew why. He couldn't see Dan very well and he was trying to get a good target before he made his draw. The talk was designed to throw Dan off guard. The owlhoot looked so burly and competent that I was sure Dan stood no show against him.

"Forget me, Dan!" I screamed. "Get away from here! He'll kill you!"

Even as I screamed the owlhoot laughed, loud and confidently. His knees bent and his hands flashed to his holsters in a draw faster than I had ever seen. His guns roared and flamed, and I was so scared I didn't know whether to look or not.

BUT I COULDN'T tear my eyes away. Dan had somehow fallen to the ground. His sixgun thundered, well after the outlaw had shot. The owlhoot seemed to stiffen and stagger forward; he struggled to bring his gun up, then fell face forward into the grass.

For a time there was an awful silence. Then I saw movement where Dan had fallen. He stood up, then came warily forward, sixgun in hand. When he came to the outlaw, he turned him over then holstered his sixgun. The next moment he was running toward me.

"Gloria, are you all right?" he asked anxiously, untying my hands.

"Yes, but how badly are you hurt?" I asked. "You fell to the ground."

"I only fell to make a poorer target of myself. And I did, because both of his shots went over my head."

I got to my feet relieved. Then I hung my head, ashamed of myself and everything that had happened, when Dan's arm went around me. "Gloria!" he said, "You taught me something. You don't know how worried I was when you rode out of camp and I followed and saw what happened. I guess I love you!"

I couldn't believe my senses! Was this the quiet Dan I'd known and loved all my life, the man I never dared hope I'd marry?

"Gloria," he asked earnestly, "will you marry me?"

I almost stopped breathing. My first impulse was to shout, "Yes." But I kept hold of myself. "Will you forget this Owlhoot Trail nonsense and take me someplace where we're not known to start out life?"

"Yes!" he said, eagerly.

"Then I'll marry you."

His lips pressed against mine and I responded with all the love I'd been saving for him.

I guess that's all there is to tell. Dan and I got married in a little town the next day. He got a good job in another part of Texas, and together we saved enough to buy a small ranch. As the years went by we bought additional land for the ranch, and children came to bless our union. Now we own one of the biggest ranches in the state, and last month Dan was elected to the state Senate.

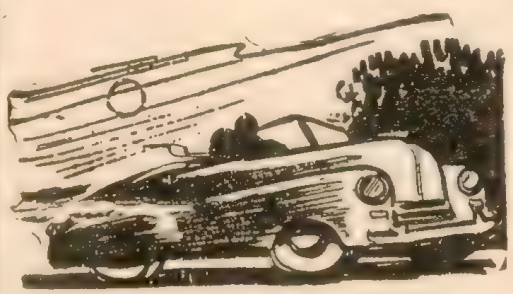
As for me, I love Dan move than ever; and I've never regretted my ride along the outlaw trail.

Experiences From Life Today

I LIED TO GET MY MAN! .....
It wasn't that I was trying to trap Tommy into marrying me; I knew that was what he wanted to do. But I felt that I had to force the issue — and there was one way...

HE PAID ME TO MARRY HIS DAUGHTER .....
It hadn't hit me yet, the full horror of it. A pig like Yost, palming off that girl on a wreck like me...

THEY CALLED ME "BAD GIRL" .....
If Duke left town, it would be the end of things for me. So what I did made trouble for everyone — but how could I tell them the truth?



These three gripping romances lead off the July

TODAY'S LOVE STORIES

This digest-size magazine is now on sale at all stands

She Wore His Brand

by Katherine McComb

Even though he didn't really know her, he realized that Bea Cameron was what he wanted...

"BEA!" CALLED a quivery voice at the tent flap. "Bea, honey, wake up. The mule's gone. That old skin-flint of a Judas has pulled the stake pin ag'in an' wandered off somewheres."

"Yes, Pa," answered a drowsy voice, and Beatrice Cameron sat up in her grass bed and yawned. She had been dreaming of her childhood home in far-off Georgia; a white two-story house with wide galleries held up by huge white pillars—but that was before the war between the states. When it was over everything was gone. Her father had migrated, with Bea and her mother, to Texas.

But there was little he could do with

a peg where a good right leg had once been. So they kept drifting west. First New Mexico Territory, then Arizona. There her father got in with the buffalo hunters, driving the wagons and helping with the skinning. Then her mother died and he settled down with Beatrice for a time in Tucson, where she attended school in a little adobe school house. But the roaming fever soon got in his blood again.

The buffaloes were gone now, swept from the range almost overnight by ruthless hunters. But an eastern fertilizer company was offering good prices for the bones. So here they were, moving up and down the old grazing grounds of the mighty herds, where sun-bleached heaps of bones beckoned from the brown, parched earth. When their wagon bed was full of these bones they would drive to the nearest shipping point, where mountains of stark skeletons awaited transportation east.

As her father called again, Beatrice snatched up her blue jeans and got quickly into them. "Judas!" she mumbled as she buttoned a red-checked shirt over rounded breasts and picked up a short cotton jacket. What an appropriate name for that ornery Missouri mule! This was the second time he had pulled this trick in a week. She'd drive that stake all the way to China next time!

Her father was stumbling around the camp fire, boiling coffee and stirring up meal and water for corn pone when she came out.

"You go ahead and eat, Pa," she told him. "I'd better hurry on before that mule gets halfway back to Missouri."

"He hasn't been gone long," encouraged her father. "The tracks are fresh. If it wasn't for this peg—"

They had made camp on Apache Creek, at the foot of a broken, sun-baked mountain range. And toward these mountains the mule tracks pointed.

Bea hurried along over rocky ground, enjoying the tang of desert air, alive to the vastness of the country, which always dwarfed her to ant size, making her feel lowly and insignificant—a mere speck on the universe.

It was early May and grass crowded up through the rocks, defying the moisture. So the mule traveled slowly, cropping as he went. The sun was just poking his nose over the mountain when she came upon Judas, nibbling leisurely in a little valley. But when she attempted to capture the dangling picket rope he came alive with startling suddenness, threw up his head, snorted and bolted across the valley and up the hillside.

"Bul-headed traitor," grumbled Bea, following.

On a little level the mule stopped to graze again. But when she approached he moved on, with another snort of defiance, keeping the end of the rope always just out of her reach. Over hill and canyon he kept up this game, until her feet were weary and her patience exhausted.

Finally on a ledge about as wide as a wagon road he halted, seemingly ready to give up the chase. Bea caught up the end of the rope and began pulling him toward her. He came, docile as a lamb. But, when within a few feet of her, he whirled without warning and with a vicious squeal lashed out with both hind feet. Bea jumped aside, escaping the well-aimed heels by inches, but landing too near the edge of a sheer cliff. She felt the earth beneath her feet give way, then the horrible sensation of falling into space.

She landed with a jar that seemed to drive her backbone up through her skull. For a moment she lay in a heap, too stunned to move. Then she heard a raucous "Hee Haw! Hee Haw! Hee Haw!" far above her. Darn that mule! She'd like to break every bone in his body.

She was so angry that she got to her

feet without realizing it. Well, at least there was no serious damage to her anatomy. She looked cautiously about. She had dropped perhaps twenty feet and landed on a rocky ledge about ten or twelve feet wide and maybe a hundred feet long. She peeped over the edge and drew back with a shudder. A sheer drop of at least a hundred feet to the canyon floor. No way of getting down there. No way of getting up either—unless she could fly. Oh, why did the Good Lord ever create mules—especially Judas!

SHE HUDDLED against the side of the mountain, her body aching from shock and bruise. Her red-gold hair had fallen from its moorings and fluffed out in waves of copper around a face that refused tan, but had accepted a generous sprinkling of golden freckles across the nose and cheeks. But she didn't let herself get panicky. She knew her father would find her sooner or later—probably later. For his progress over rough country was pretty slow. And neither Judas nor Beck, the other mule, had been broken to ride.

As the sun blew its sizzling breath down on her, Bea picked up the jacket she had discarded and draped it over her head, wishing for the straw sombrero she had left at the wagon.

If she could only do something besides wait! She sat there picking nervously at the ledge of brownish-red rock interlaced with yellow. Pretty, she thought, holding up a fragment to the light. She had collected rocks from all over the plains. It was a hobby with her: white rocks, black rocks, yellow rocks, red rocks—but she had never seen one just like this. She dropped it carelessly into her jacket pocket just as a man's voice called faintly. "Miss Cameron. Oh, Miss Cameron."

She scrambled to her feet. "Here!" she shouted through cupped hands. "Down on the ledge."

She kept on shouting until a figure in a big hat appeared on the lip of the ledge above.

"You all right down there, Miss?" came an anxious voice.

"Yes," she assured him. "Just get me up."

"I'll lower my lariat," he told her. "Fasten it under your arms, good and tight." The rope came dangling down, even as he spoke. She caught the end and made it fast under her arms. Then began a slow, steady pulling.

After tense moments of dangling like a bucket in a well, she was hoisted over the edge of the cliff by careful hands. On her feet she stared at her rescuer curiously. He was young, lean-flanked and wide shouldered. 'Cowboy' was branded on him from head to heels. She had seen hundreds of them in her wanderings with her father. But none of them had eyes as blue as this one, or the little smile that lurked at the corner of his mouth.

"Your pa didn't tell me how purty you was," he said, breaking the ice. "Or I would 'a' thought you had been kidnaped. How come you to be down there?"

She smiled faintly. "It's all Judas' fault."

"Judas! Now ain't that queer—I thought that ol' penny-pincher hung hisself long ago."

"Judas is our mule," she laughed. "That's him!" she pointed to the culprit quietly cropping grass on the side of the hill. "He kicked at me. I dodged and went over the cliff—"

"Takes after his namesake all right, don't he?"

Without more ado he mounted his black mustang and moved forward, building a loop as he went. When within rope's throw of the mule the lariat leaped out, hissed over the runaway and settled neatly around his neck. The cowboy took a few hitches of the rope around his saddle horn and came down the slope, the mule following meekly.

"Your pa's right worried," he told her then. "Reckon we better mosey. Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. Name's Chad Butler, waddy for the Broken Arrow. I was out huntin' strays an' come upon your camp—"

"And Pa sent you to look for his *stray,*" she laughed.

He nodded, swung down and lifted her easily to the rump of his wiry mustang, then swung into the saddle.

"Better hold tight," he advised as the pony moved forward at a brisk walk. The goin's purty rough."

BEA SLIPPED an arm around his waist and the contact sent a wave of electricity racing through her body, like the time she had touched the telegrapher's key in San Antonio.

"I—I'm sorry to take up so much of your time," she apologized. "But at least you found *two* strays, Judas and me."

"I done right well, for a beginnin'." he flung over his shoulder. "After you find a stray, the next thing—if it's a maverick—is to put a brand on it—"

"Judas has the whole map of the U.S. on him, he was once owned by the army," she hastened.

"I wasn't thinkin' 'specially o' Judas —he's got the brand o' Satan stamped all over him, too—" He turned in the saddle and regarded her with an impish grin.

They were moving down a narrow canyon. Suddenly a stiff whirlwind swooped through the draw, flinging sand and gravel into their faces. Bea let go her hold on Chad and threw up her hand to protect her eyes. At the same moment the horse, probably blinded by the whirling dust, stepped on a loose stone and slipped. As he fought for safe footing, Bea felt herself toppling. She clutched at Chad's shirt, but missed. The next instant she was sprawled among the rocks.

Before she could move, Chad was beside her, gathering her up in strong arms. "You all right?" His eyes probed anxiously into hers.

"Yes," she said, embarrassed. "But how stupid—"

His face came closer. So close that she could see the deep yearning in his eyes. "An' about that brand—" he probed. "You're not wearin' one, are you?"

She shook her head and his lips came down on hers; tender, sweet, joyful, yet searing into her soul as deeply as any hot iron could.

"That's my brand," he said, releasing her. "From now on you belong to me."

She got to her feet, more shaken than she had ever been in her life. "Why, I—I don't even know you," she stammered. But her heart was giving her the lie. It was telling her that this was the man she loved; the man she had been waiting for, and that she knew it.

"No, you don't know me," he chuckled. "I might be Brigham Young, with a dozen wives. An' you might be Calamity Jane, for all I know. But you're what I want, an' I'm rarin' to have my brand recorded an' take you to the home corral anytime you say the word."

She laughed up at him. "You're kind o' thin for Brigham. But I'll give your proposition some thought—"

He would have kissed her again, but she waved him off. She was telling the truth. She had to give this sudden proposition some thought—serious thought.

THEY WERE both quiet as they rode on down the canyon and came out near her camp. Her father stumped forward to meet them.

"I'm sure much obliged, young feller," he said as Bea slipped from the horse and explained quickly what had happened.

"This is no life for a girl like Bea," the old man told Chad with a sad shake of the head. "When we make us

a little stake we're goin' to settle down somewheres—"

"I'm thinkin' seriously o' doin' that same thing myself," Chad told him, with a sly grin in Bea's direction.

"I'll fix some breakfast," she said, hastening to the dying campfire, her cheeks as red as the coals smouldering there. Chad followed, built up the fire and put coffee on to boil while Bea mixed the corn batter.

Later, as they sat opposite each other drinking strong coffee and eating corn pone, she thought how wonderful it would be to have him there always, and the thought sent her blood racing.

After eating Chad stood around, seeming loathe to leave. But Jess Cameron was in a hurry to be off. More than half the morning was gone already. So Chad helped him hitch up the team. Then he strode over to where Bea was packing cooking utensils into a box.

"When an' where will I see you again?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. "I don't know. We move about over the prairie, here and there, wherever the herds used to graze—"

"I'll be lookin' for you," he said as her father called to her to hurry. "I'll be wantin' that answer."

It was on the end of her tongue to give it to him now, but her father was calling again.

Chad rode beside the wagon till they turned north, then he reined up his mount.

"So long," he called, taking off his hat and waving it till the dust from the wagon hid him.

"Kinda stuck on that young feller, ain't you?" her father asked, watching her shrewdly.

"Yes," she said frankly.

"Seems like a nice enough hombre," he went on thoughtfully. "But you can't always judge a watermelon by the color o' the rind."

"No," she agreed calmly.

After that they rode in silence until a pile of bleached bones leered at them from the green grass.

"You jest set still an' drive," Jess said kindly. "I'll do the walkin' this mornin'."

All day long, whether walking or riding, Bea kept thinking of Chad and feeling his lips on hers. Late in the afternoon black clouds began to boil up in the east. They hastened to make camp, but before supper was over the rain had started to come down. By dark it was a deluge.

Bea finished her chores and got into bed as quickly as possible. But as she lay there listening to the rain thudding against the tent, her thoughts were still of Chad Butler. He worked for the Broken Arrow, one of the biggest ranches in the country. That was all she knew about him. But her father was wrong. She could judge this melon by the rind. He was clean and kind and wholesome. That was all that mattered—that and their love for each other. And when he came again she would tell him she was ready to go to the home corral. But the days slipped past and he did not come...

AT FIRST she thought that he had just been delayed by his work. And each morning as she set out with her father her heart would sing "This is the day. My love will come today." But summer drifted into autumn, with fresh winds riffling the dry grass, and he did not come.

Disappointed and disillusioned, she began to upbraid herself. What a little fool she had been. He was just a care free cowboy, ready to make love to any girl he chanced to meet, and she had taken him seriously. How he must be laughing at her! Well, if they ever met again she would show him two could laugh.

One night they camped on the Gila. The wind blew cold, and Bea slipped on her jacket before laying wood for the fire. As she searched the pockets for a match, her fingers touched the

rock she had picked up on the ledge that day. She fondled it for a moment, thinking of Chad and the first time they had looked into each other's eyes. She could feel the thrill of his nearness yet. But that was all over—

She turned quickly, laid the rock on a stump, so she would remember to put it in the box with the others, and went on kindling the fire.

She was still coaxing the reluctant flame when two horsemen rode up and hailed her father. She glanced up swiftly. They were rough, hard-visaged men with guns on their hips. The smaller one, a sparse fellow with sandy hair and beard, led a pack mule, with a shovel, pick-ax and other miner's paraphernalia tied to the saddle. Uninterested, Bea bent again to her fire.

The men were turning away, when the larger one, a black-bearded giant of a man, spied the rock on the stump. He swung to the ground, strode over and snatched it up. For a minute he stared curiously. Then a wild gleam lit up his dark, snaky eyes.

He swung around to Bea. "Where did this come from?" he demanded, leaning over her.

"I don't remember," she said coldly. "I picked it up somewhere."

"But where? Where?" he stormed, catching her arm and jerking her to her feet.

She tore away from his grasp. "Keep your filthy hands off me," she warned angrily. But he didn't seem to hear.

"Where did you get this rock?" he repeated desperately. "It's rich in gold!"

The small man leaped to the ground and stared with feverish eyes at the rock in his partner's hand. Jess thumped over, his old .44 swinging at his middle.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded.

The large man turned hard eyes upon him. "The girl's got a rock streaked through with gold—won't tell where she got it."

"Well, if she don't wanta tell, that's her business," Jess snapped gamely, eyeing the big man through squinted lids, hand near his gun butt. Bea saw the small man's hand sneak toward his holster.

"But I tell you I don't remember," she hastened, knowing that a convincing lie was the only thing that would save her own and her father's lives. "I've picked up rocks all over the plains— Here, I can show you—" She ran to the wagon, took out a man's shoe box and spilled its contents on the ground—rocks of every kind and color.

"But what were you doing with this one?" demanded the big man suspiciously.

"I found it in this jacket pocket when I was searching for a match to light the fire," Bea said, looking him straight in the eye. "I haven't worn it for days. I don't know when or where I picked up the rock."

He eyed her for a long minute. "Maybe you're tellin' the truth—an' maybe you're lyin'," he growled finally. "But if you try any tricks on San Antone Sam an' Wolf Larsen you're gonna be sorry—mighty sorry. Savvy?"

She nodded and stood there dumbly as the two men mounted and rode out, then she turned frightened eyes upon her father.

"I know exactly where I got that rock, Pa—the ledge I landed on the day Judas kicked me over the bank."

"What's that?" his faded blue eyes were suddenly bright with excitement. "Then that means we're rich, honey. No more trampin' over the desert—"

"We've got to be mighty careful, Pa. Those coyotes will be spying on us from morning till night—and they won't hestitate to kill, once they find the location. The only thing for us is to work back slowly, picking up bones as we go. When we reach the spot

where we camped I'll find the ledge—then we'll have to file on it."

THE NEXT day they turned toward the hills, moving slowly, acting normally. At first they tried to find their old tracks, but the early rains had completely obliterated them. After a few days they became confused, uncertain which notch in the mountains they had camped beneath.

One day Bea caught sight of a horseman far to the rear. In spite of herself, her heart soared on wings of hope. Perhaps it was Chad— Then the rider disappeared in a draw and she saw him no more. Another day she glimpsed a rider in a fringe of willows down by the river. This time she knew, and goose pimples pricked her skin. They were being followed by those terrible men. After that a feeling of uneasiness rode her day and night. Her father, too, was as jumpy as a fugitive from a lynch mob.

"We're already beginnin' to reap the reward o' riches, honey," he said one day with a wry smile. "For months we've roamed the desert as free an' fearless as crows. Now, because you found a rock with gold markin's, we're stewin' with fear an' worry—"

At night Bea slept in her tent as usual. But ever since the visit of the ruffians, Jess had carried his bedroll and Sharp's rifle to a hiding place near camp. But so far nothing had disturbed them.

Then they came to Apache creek, at the foot of the hills, and, after a long search, found their old camping ground. Once that night Bea thought she heard a stealthy step outside her tent. She sat up in bed, grabbed her gun and waited, tense as a filly under her first saddle, but she heard nothing more. Finally she lay down, but memories of Chad, brought back by this campsite, kept her awake till long after minight.

Before daylight next morning she was up and cooking breakfast. Her father, at Bea's suggestion, had slipped old Judas' rope and hazed him toward the hills, hoping he would take the same route as previously. But trust Judas to be contrary-wise. Instead of heading due east, as he had done that first day, he turned north down a shallow draw near camp and was contentedly cropping brown grass there.

With a groan of disgust, Bea took the eastern trail. She felt sure she could find the ledge Judas had kicked her over. But, in case the two men were spying, she had wanted to use the run-away mule as an excuse for her wanderings.

After a fifteen minute walk she came to an out-cropping of rock that looked familiar, but it was not the one. She crossed a dusty canyon and wound around a hill, and another, and another, until she finally stopped, completely confused. Nothing looked familiar now.

After a short breathing spell she started out again, determination in every step. Up this canyon and over that hill she trudged, always believing she would find the ledge at the next turn. But she did not.

At last, footsore and brain-weary, she turned back. Everything was wrong, she told herself bitterly. She had lost the gold mine—if it really was gold. But, worst of all, she had lost Chad. Chad! Why, if he were here he would know exactly where to find the ledge. Cowboys always remembered such things. Perhaps if she swallowed her pride and went to the Broken Arrow, offered him half interest to help her find it—

DEEP IN thought she rounded a curve in the path and a man stepped from behind a huge boulder, completely blocking her way. She shrank back with a startled cry and her hand streaked for the forty-five at her hip. But the man leaped forward, struck down her hand before she could lift the gun.

"Now maybe you'll tell me where you found that rock," barked the big, snake-eyed man who had taken her specimen.

"I don't know," she said firmly.

"Then what are you doin' in these hills?"

She knew a lie would serve no purpose now. "I've tried to find it. I've tried everywhere I picked up rocks—at least everywhere I remember. But there's none like it."

"You think you found it in these hills?" he demanded.

"I told you I don't know where I found it," she said calmly.

His scowl was murderous. "We gotta do something about your memory. Come on, we're goin' back to your camp."

At camp they found the other outlaw and Bea's father, the latter tied hand and feet and bound to a wagon wheel. He had brought old Judas up and tied him to a sapling near the wagon, where the mule stood hip-shot, ears drooping loosely, asleep on his feet.

"When I got back with the mule," Jess explained, "this polecat," nodding toward the sandy-haired man, "was hidin' in the wagon—got the drop on me—"

"Heat up the irons, Wolf," interrupted the big man. "We gotta be miracle workers—restore a failin' memory—" both men laughed at the joke.

Wolf put a running iron in the fire.

"Do you think if I knew where I found that rock I wouldn't go there myself?" Bea asked desperately.

Her captor sneered. "You'll remember all right when you hear your ole man screamin' for mercy."

Horror blanched Bea's face. "You wouldn't dare—" she began. But her tormentor turned to the man at the fire, ignoring her.

"How about it, Wolf?"

Wolf took the red-hot iron from the fire and started toward her father.

"Stop!" screamed the girl. "Stop! I'll tell all I know."

The big man grinned triumphantly. "Come on then, start talkin'."

"You start reachin'," ordered a cold voice, and Chad stepped from behind the wagon, six-shooter leveled at the dark man's heart.

"Chad," whispered Bea, staring at the thin, gray face of the man she loved. His left arm rode in a sling and when he moved she noticed a distinct limp.

"Chad," she said again. "What—?" But she got no further. For Big Sam grabbed her with his left hand and swung her in front of him as he snatched out his gun with his right. But as the gun came up Bea grabbed his arm with both hands, sending the bullet meant for Chad into the ground. Sam swore violently and tried to shake her loose, but she clung like a grass bur.

OVER AT the wagon wheel Wolf had dropped the branding iron and jerked out his gun. Before he could fire, Chad sent a quick shot crashing through his right shoulder. His gun clattered to the ground, and he folded slowly.

As Chad whirled toward Sam, the outlaw started backing toward a clump of willows, where he and Wolf had left their horses, dragging the struggling girl with him.

"One move outa you, Cowboy an' she gets the first shot," he snarled.

Halfway between the wagon and the willows old Judas stood. The shooting had awakened him from his peaceful slumbers. As Sam backed toward him, his head snapped around, baleful eyes gleaming. Suddenly his long ears flattened against his head. Then, with a savage squeal, he lashed out with both hind feet, catching the outlaw squarely in the seat of the pants. Sam flew one way and his gun the other. Then he sat down abruptly in a clump

of prickly pears ten feet from his starting point.

Yelling with pain and rage, he attempted to rise, but more prickly pear thorns thrust their points into vulnerable flesh, reducing him to a groaning heap.

The mule's kick had torn Bea free of her captor, sent her into a sprawling heap just clear of the cactus. Chad kicked away the outlaw's gun, then gathered her up in his one good arm. She slumped against him.

"Bet you thought I was never comin'," he murmured. "Couple days after we met a locoed steer crashed into my horse. For a minute looked like we was both goners. But I got in a lucky shot 'fore the horse rolled over on me—Been laid up ever since, worryin' an' stewin' over you—then one o' the boys told me he saw a campfire here last night—"

"Hey, you moon-struck youngins," called Jess impatiently. "How about takin' time out to untie me?"

Bea cut her father's bonds while Chad extracted Sam from the prickly pears and tied his hands and feet. Then he was dumped into the wagon bed beside the buffalo bones. After Wolf's wound was dressed he joined his confederate. Then, leaving Jess to guard the prisoners, Chad and Bea set out to find the lucky ledge.

As Bea had figured, Chad went straight to the spot. With one end of his lariat tied to his saddle horn and the other under his arms, he lowered himself to the ledge. In a few minutes he was back with several specimens.

"It's gold all right," he affirmed. "Or I'm a cross-eyed monkey. You'll be rich, Bea, honey."

"*We'll* be rich," she corrected, smiling up at him. "Remember *I wear your brand.* And besides, you found the ledge—"

"It's Judas we have to thank," he grinned. "There's a mule to tie to."

"And I used to call him a traitor—and other things," she laughed. "But all the time he was an angel with long ears."

"You're the angel," he contradicted, pulling her close. "But we got work to do, honey. We'll build a marker for you—then make tracks to Globe to file— What you aim to call the mine?"

"Why, the Judas, of course," she beamed.

"To the Judas!" he said, and bending his head confirmed the christening with a long kiss.

It was the Duke against the King, when Jeff Duke challenged the rule of a man named King, the terror of the country. And challenging King included fighting King's vicious son, whose lustful eyes had rested on a girl named Isabelle . . .

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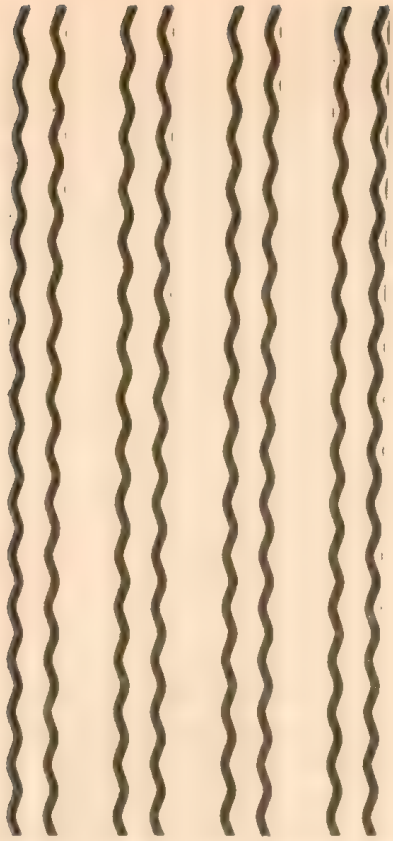

LUCY AND THE SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

by Barbara Bonham

Jim knew that his plan was dangerous, but the time had come for drastic action...

THE SUN was beginning to get warm as U.S. Marshal Ben Hunter—alias Jim Adams—rode into Cherokee Flat. The town was still quiet. Two men moved along the short length of the street and a lone horse stood hitched below a sign that read Tucker's General Store. Jim Adams, as he had chosen to call himself, tied his horse at the rail outside the Cherokee Trail Saloon and stretched, using that moment to take a good look at what Cherokee Flat called Main Street.

There were about a dozen buildings in all, including a livery barn, a feed store and a small building marked "Sheriff's Office". Jim let his eyes glide smoothly over the weathered sign. This was one time he'd have to work without the help of the local law.

After beating the dust off his clothes he sauntered into the saloon. It wasn't much. Just some battered wooden tables and chairs and a scarred bar. A thin man with gray hair and steel-rimmed spectacles was sweeping up. Behind the bar a pretty girl with blonde hair and blue eyes polished glasses and ignored the red-haired man on the other side of the bar who was trying to talk to her.

"Mornin'," the thin gray haired man said nodding.

"Mornin'," Jim answered. He glanced at the girl behind the bar and

served by a woman." The girl raked him from head to toe with cold suspicious eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. No offense meant. It's just that I've never been served a drink by a lady before."

"I keep tellin' her it ain't decent," her father grumbled as he took his place behind the bar in spite of his daughter. "But she's the stubbornness one gal I ever did see."

She smiled suddenly and hugged her father. "Now Dad, you know you need

then back at the thin man. "I'd like some rye."

The man said "Sure," and started toward the bar.

"Never mind, Dad, I'll serve him. That is, if he doesn't object to being me to help you." Then her smile faded and her eyes were cold again as they met Jim's. "Besides, this is a decent town and there isn't any harm in my tending bar."

"Mighty pleasant too, ain't it?" the

red haired man asked. His glance for Jim didn't last long. He had eyes only for the girl and Jim didn't like the expression in them.

"Why, yes it is," Jim replied cheerfully. He tried to make it sound as complimentary as possible because he could see the other man's remark had riled the girl to the exploding point. Her face was white with hatred. "Thank you, Ma'am," he said as she served him the rye.

"Do you want another one?" she asked brusquely as he downed the drink.

"No, thanks. I don't generally drink this early in the day but I've been riding all night and I needed something to take the kinks out. What I need now is some breakfast."

"What'll it be?" she asked.

"How about some fried potatoes, some eggs and a lot of coffee?"

THE GIRL nodded and disappeared through a door behind one end of the bar. She reappeared almost immediately with a coffee pot and a cup. She set them down on a table and said, "You can have some coffee while you wait." Then she disappeared again.

"Just passing through?" The red haired man turned his back to the bar as Jim sat down and poured himself some coffee.

"That depends," Jim answered. He smacked his lips appreciatively over the coffee. "If I can find a job I'll stay. Otherwise I'll move on. Either of you know where I could find work?"

"There ain't no work that I know of," the thin man said quickly. Too quickly, Jim thought.

"Abe Meadows is looking for some one to help in his livery barn," the red haired man offered. "His hired man got itchy feet and took off a week ago."

A week ago, Jim thought. The barkeep should have known that. An idea came to him. "Thanks. I'll ask at the livery barn. The name is Jim Adams," he said and waited.

The older man kept quiet but the red haired one said, "I'm Mart Russell and he's John Sands. The pretty one is Lucy."

So, I was right, Jim told himself. This is the boy's dad. And the girl is his sister. No wonder they're so close-mouthed and suspicious. Now I'm sure the boy's around here someplace. But where?

At that moment Lucy Sands came in with a plate heaped with potatoes and eggs. "You just passing through?" she asked bluntly as she put the plate down in front of him.

Mart Russell chuckled. "We already been through that with him. He's lookin' for a job." His voice was hoarse, as if his throat was burned from too much raw whiskey. And the look in his pale lashless eyes when they looked at Lucy Sands had Jim reaching far back for his self-control.

"There isn't any work in Cherokee Flat," Lucy said.

"I already told him there was," Mart said and his eyes narrowed suddenly. "Funny how sure you and your dad were that there wasn't any work for him here."

The girl's manner was instantly wary and Jim wondered why. "What's so funny about it?" she asked sharply.

"You both should have known Abe Meadows was looking for somebody."

"I forgot," she snapped. "Do you expect me to remember everything I hear in this place?"

Her spitfire attitude seemed to reassure the man and he grinned. "What's your excuse, Pop?" he asked John Sands.

The older man met his glance levelly. "I don't need an excuse." His voice carried the same hatred Jim had seen in his daughter's face earlier. Then turning his back on Mart Russell, he swept a pile of dirt and butts out the batwing doors with brisk swipes of the broom.

Mart shrugged and turned back to the bar. "Another one, Lucy."

She poured him one without a word. Jim noticed she didn't leave the bottle where he could reach it and she made him pay for each drink as he drank it.

Jim cleaned up his plate and emptied his cup. "Mighty good breakfast," he said getting to his feet. "How much do I owe you?"

Lucy figured it up and he tossed the coins on the counter. "Guess I'll go down and see about that job."

ABE MEADOWS' Livery Barn stood at the south end of the street. Jim led his horse down there and hitched it outside. Inside, a short man with wiry black hair and bowlegs was cleaning a stall. He looked up as Jim stopped in the doorway. "Howdy."

"Howdy," Jim said. "I hear you're looking for some help."

"That's right. You want the job?"

"I sure do," Jim grinned.

"You got it then. Open at seven thirty and close at six." Abe Meadows turned back to his cleaning.

Jim smiled to himself. This man didn't believe in wasting words. "Maybe I could go to the store and buy me a change of clothes."

The man nodded and asked, "You need any money?"

"No, thanks. I've got a little left."

Jim left his horse and went back up the street to the general store. The proprietor showed him some shirts and pants in his size and he bought an outfit. Just as the man was handing him the package, Lucy Sands came in. Jim took his package and pretended to look at some knives that had just caught his attention.

"Hello, Miss Lucy. What can I help you with?"

She read off a list of things that sounded innocent enough until she came to, "A bag of tobacco and a package of papers."

The proprietor reached under the counter for the tobacco and remarked, "Your dad must be smoking heavy these days. It was only yesterday he was in buying the makin's and here you are buying some more."

Out of the corner of his eye Jim saw a faint flush rise to Lucy's face. "I guess he forgot to tell me he'd bought some for himself yesterday, but I might as well take it anyway." She pushed back a wisp of hair from her face and Jim saw that her hand trembled.

That cinches it, he thought. Now I know Chuck Sands is in this neck of the woods. I'd bet my life that tobacco is for him. If I can keep an eye on her, she'll probably lead me right to him.

When she left the store, he followed. He caught up with her outside on the boardwalk and, tipping his hat he said, "I'd sure be happy to carry your parcels, Ma'am."

She eyed him haughtily without slowing her pace. "No, thank you. I can manage."

Jim was thinking how pretty she looked in her blue dress and blue bonnet and then he caught himself. He couldn't allow his feelings to get mixed up with this girl. He had a job to do and he didn't want anything interfering. Besides, when his job was done, Lucy would hate him as bad as she appeared to hate Mart Russell.

"Anything you say," he replied. "I thought you might like to know I got that job at the livery barn."

"Why would I care about that?" she replied, her chin in the air.

"Well, I—that is—I mean I thought with me going to be around now I might be seeing more of you." He made himself stammer like a shy man trying to ask a girl if he could court her.

"You probably will if you like whiskey," Lucy told him icily and she swept on ahead, leaving him standing there awkwardly.

Well, he thought ruefully, if I can't find out what I want to know by being friendly, I'll use some other way.

AS HE MADE his way back to the livery barn he thought about Chuck Sands and wondered how he

could have turned out to be a killer. His father and sister seemed like good folks in spite of their unfriendliness toward strangers.

The briefing he had been given on young Sands was that he had shot a man down in cold blood during an argument. He had claimed self defense but couldn't prove it and so he had broken out of jail and escaped. That had been a year ago. The law had been trailing him ever since. Two months ago U.S. Marshal Ben Hunter had been assigned to the case and the trail had led him to Cherokee Flat, Sands' hometown. Now, as Jim Adams, he was prepared to sit back and wait for Sands' father or sister to lead him to his man.

That meant he'd have to watch them every minute of the day and night until they made their move.

When he got to the livery barn he asked Abe Meadows if he could wait and start work the next day.

"I rode all night and I'm needing some sleep pretty bad."

"I reckon that'd be all right," Meadows said leaning on his pitchfork. "You found a room yet?"

"No, I haven't."

"Mrs. Johnson can probably put you up. She rents out rooms. Her house is behind Tucker's store."

"Thanks. I'll go see about one right now. Can I leave my horse here for the night?"

Meadows nodded. "You sure you don't need any money?"

Jim smiled his thanks at the man's concern and shook his head. "I can manage till pay day. See you in the morning at seven thirty."

"Here, you open up in the morning," Meadows said tossing him the key. "I could use a little extra sleep too."

He made his way up the alley behind Main Street until he came to the rear of Tucker's General Store. Across the alley and set back a short distance was a large white house with a porch running around three sides of it. He cut off toward it and as he came closer he could see a sign that read "Rooms" jutting out from one corner of the porch.

As he approached the house the delicious odor of bread baking came to him. He knocked on the door and a moment later a plump woman in a flowered apron answered. Brushing back a wisp of gray hair from her moist forehead she said, "Mornin'."

"Mornin'," Jim said removing his hat. "I was wondering if I could get a room here."

She nodded and opened the screen door for him. "Come on in and I'll show it to you."

As he followed her ample figure up the stairs she asked, "You be staying here long?"

"For awhile, I guess. I got the job at Abe Meadows' barn." He really didn't expect to be there more than a few days but he couldn't very well tell her that. "Have you got a room on the north? I don't like too much sun."

"Sure have. Will this one do?" she asked flinging open a door by the stairway.

IT WAS PLAINLY furnished but clean. The iron bedstead was freshly painted and the rag rugs on the floor though faded, were spotless. Jim strode across the room and peered out the window. It was just as he had figured when he'd first seen the house. This north room would give him a clear view of the rear door of the saloon.

"This is fine," he said. "I'll take it."

"Will you be eating here too?"

Jim hesitated. "Well, maybe part of the time." He grinned and said, "I had a mighty delicious breakfast a little while ago at the saloon."

Mrs. Johnson laughed heartily. "She is awfully pretty, ain't she?"

"She sure is."

"But you better look out for her. She's got a temper. Hot temper kinda runs in that family. Her brother got

riled once and shot a man down in cold blood."

"That so?" Jim asked.

Encouraged by his interest and pleased to be able to repeat the story to someone who obviously hadn't heard it before, she launched into it. "Chuck had threatened to kill the man if he didn't stay away from Lucy. Lot's of people heard him. Then a couple nights later Chuck shot him. He claimed the other man drew first but Mart Russell was right there and he said Chuck drew first. There was never any doubt about it. The whole town knew Chuck had had a trigger temper ever since he was little. And he was quick on the draw. Quicker than anybody in town. He used to spend hours practicing."

"Mart Russell," Jim said repeating the name. "I met him this morning in the saloon." So that was why Lucy and John Sands had seemed to hate him so bitterly. It was his story that contradicted Chuck Sands' plea of self defense.

"You'll be seeing him here too," Mrs. Johnson said. "He has the room down the hall. He was George Sims' friend. That's the man that was killed," she explained. "They had only been in town a few days when Chuck shot George. After he buried his friend, Mart stayed on here."

"What does he do for a living?"

Mrs. Johnson shook her head. "Not much. Just odd jobs now and then. Enough to pay his rent and buy his whiskey."

"Looked to me like Mart's friend wasn't the only one interested in the Sands girl," Jim said. "Mart was making kind of a nuisance of himself around her in the saloon."

"It's no secret he's sweet on her but 'course she can't see him for dirt 'cause he spoke up against her brother. Can't blame her in a way but everybody's dirt to her since Chuck's trouble. She goes around with her nose in the air like the whole town smells bad." The landlady's face flushed. "That don't set too well with us folks and if there was another saloon in town I reckon John Sands wouldn't get any business atall."

"Where do they live?" Jim asked casually.

"Above the saloon."

"Maybe you're right," Jim said. "Maybe I'd better look out for her." He threw his hat on the dresser and yawned. "Well, I guess I'll get some shut eye. I feel like I could sleep for a week."

"You go right ahead. Nobody'll bother you. You'll find the bed nice and soft." She stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind her.

JIM DIDN'T try the bed. He moved the only chair in the room over by the window and stationed himself there. The curtain was a plain white panel made out of thin material. He could see out easily without being seen himself.

He reached for the cracked saucer on the dresser which he guessed to be an ashtray and built him a cigarette. Then he sat back and waited.

It was a long wait. He had to get up and stretch his legs several times. About the middle of the afternoon he heard someone come up the steps and go down the hall. He wondered if it was Mart Russell. A little while later someone began snoring loudly.

About six o'clock the snoring stopped and he heard footsteps going down the stairs. By that time Jim's stomach was howling for food but he refused to give in. Sooner or later the girl was bound to go to her brother and he wanted to see where she went.

Around midnight his perseverance was rewarded. There was no moon but the night was clear and lit by a billion stars. A dark figure slipped out of the rear door of the saloon and ran to the small shed behind. Even in the dark and at that distance the feminine lines were unmistakable. It was Lucy Sands all right.

A few minutes later she emerged from the shed leading a horse. She

mounted and rode off quietly, keeping her horse down to a walk.

She'll take it slow so no one will pay any attention, Jim thought. Then when she gets far enough away she'll whip her horse into a run. That would give him time to run down to the livery barn and get his horse.

He took off his boots and sneaked silently out of the house. Once outside he slipped his boots back on and went off at a run toward the livery barn. Lucky Abe Meadows had given him the key. If he hadn't, he'd have had to put his horse somewhere else where he could get to it when he needed it.

A few minutes later he was riding his horse up the alley as quietly as Lucy had ridden hers. At the end of the alley he caught the faint sound of hoof beats. He listened, gauged the direction and headed that way, still at a walk. At a safe distance from town he urged his horse into a fast gallop.

It was too fast a gallop as it turned out. He was peering ahead at the distant brakes and the rocks that rose up behind them and thinking it would be a good place for a man to hide out. There was probably more than one cave in those rocks where a man could hide.

He no sooner entered the brakes than a voice lashed out from the thicket, "What are you doing here?"

It was Lucy. He had probably caught up to her too fast and she had heard him behind her. He decided to stick to as much of the truth as he could so that his movements wouldn't appear furtive.

"I was following you," he told her. "I saw you come out of the saloon and ride off and I decided I would follow."

"Why?" she asked harshly.

"Well now, Ma'am, I know you weren't too friendly this morning but I was hoping a ride beneath the stars might soften you a little."

He heard the hiss of an angry breath and even in the darkness he could see her eyes flashing. "Well, you thought wrong. Now get back to town and let me enjoy my ride in peace."

Jim made a clucking noise with his tongue. "You aren't only unfriendly. You're just plain impolite."

She raised one arm and Jim saw the thin shadow of a whip in her hand. His hand shot out quickly and caught her arm. Then he jerked her toward him and caught her close with his free arm. She struggled like a wild cat but her strength was no match for his. Finally he managed to find her mouth and kissed her. A long time later she grew quiet and Jim heard the whip fall to the ground.

When he finally released her it was with the knowledge that she was trembling and that her heart was thudding wildly beneath the thin fabric of her blouse. He heard her breath coming in quick gasps and this time, before he could stop her, her hand flew up against his cheek with a loud smack.

"I guess you really don't want company, do you?" Jim asked rubbing his stinging cheek. "Maybe some other time," he said and spurred his horse. The animal sprang forward and galloped off but not before Jim heard something that sounded like a sob from Lucy.

AS HE RODE back to town he tried to ignore the frantic beat of his heart. It wouldn't do him any good to get soft on this girl. The dislike she felt for him now would be tame compared to what she'd feel for him after he arrested her brother. Nevertheless, he found himself thinking how pretty she was and how warm and soft her lips were after she stopped fighting him. He began wishing things were different for them. Some luck, he told himself. First girl I ever saw I wanted to look twice at and she has to be the sister of a man I'm after.

He put her from his thoughts with an effort and rode the rest of the way into town thinking about the rocks that rose behind those brakes. He was sure now that Chuck Sands was hiding out

in them someplace, but he would give himself away if he went out there looking. Most likely Sands would see him before he saw Sands. No, the thing to do was follow Lucy the next time she went to her brother. He could hide in the brakes this time near the spot she had stopped him tonight. And next time he'd make sure he wasn't seen or heard.

He bedded his horse down when he returned to the livery barn and hunted up a pile of clean straw for himself. Wasn't any use sneaking back to his room when he could sleep here the rest of the night.

NEXT MORNING at seven thirty he opened up and about half an hour later Abe Meadows came to work. By that time Jim was already cleaning stalls. He stuck to it until he was done and then feeling lank from hunger he asked, "Mind if I take half hour or so off and go get me some breakfast. I didn't take time to eat at the boarding house."

"Go ahead. You already done two men's work." Abe Meadows' dark eyes swept the barn with satisfaction.

Jim left and hurried up the street to the Cherokee Trail Saloon. John Sands was alone in the place, cleaning up the mess from the night before. Lucy wasn't in sight.

"Mornin'!" Jim said nodding and sat down at a table. "I'd like the same breakfast I had yesterday morning only double and with a steak on the side."

John Sands scratched his head. "I guess I don't remember what you had yesterday." From his behavior Jim guessed Lucy hadn't told him he had followed her the night before.

"I remember, Dad." Lucy opened the door to the right of the bar far enough to call out to her father and then closed it before Jim could catch a glimpse of her.

"Sounds like you're mighty hungry," John Sands remarked.

Jim nodded. "I slept through supper last night." It was a lie but he couldn't very well tell the truth.

"Lucy tells me you got the job down at Abe's place."

"Yup."

"Planning on settling down in Cherokee Flat?"

Jim was beginning to feel like a pump handle he'd been pumped so much in the last twenty four hours. "Don't know yet," he replied. "I might. This seems like a pretty nice town."

John Sands' lined face twisted bitterly. "You might find out different."

Jim rubbed his chin and his whiskers rasped against his fingers. "Sounds like you don't like this town much."

The older man didn't answer. He looked as if he wished he hadn't said what he had.

"If you don't like it why don't you sell out and move?" Jim persisted.

"I can't. Yet," John Sands said tersely and disappeared into what must have been the kitchen.

A little while later he and Lucy both reappeared with his breakfast. Jim tied right into the food but not before he observed that Lucy's face was slightly flushed and her eyes like blue ice when she looked at him. She left the room as soon as his breakfast was set before him and John Sands went on about his cleaning.

Jim wolfed the food, washing it down with quantities of hot strong coffee. He was too hungry to talk to John Sands. Besides, he knew what he wanted to know. Chuck Sands was out there in the rocks a few miles from town.

When he finished, he paid and left. He went back to the livery barn and put in a full day. He knew there wasn't any use watching Lucy in the day time any more. She wouldn't ride out to the rocks in broad day light for fear of being seen.

THAT NIGHT he was waiting in the brake when he heard a horse approaching. He pushed aside a branch of the brushwood and peered out. He

had to wait until the rider got closer before he could definitely identify it as Lucy. As soon as he was sure it was she, he let the branch back into place and sat quietly. She was taking no chances. She entered the brake about half a mile from where she had caught Jim the night before. He listened, noting the direction she was taking and then set off in pursuit, being careful not to let his horse follow too close.

He let himself be guided by the sound of her horse's hoofbeats. When the hooves slowed to an uneven walk, he knew she had reached the rocks and was making her way upward. He slowed his own horse to a careful walk hoping she wouldn't hear him.

He stopped just at the edge of the brakes at the foot of the rocks and tied his horse. He listened and could hear her still climbing upward. Then the sound stopped. He waited for a few minutes, listening, to make sure she wasn't continuing on by foot and then he started up. It was a steep climb but not a hard one. A man could have ridden a horse up easily.

He made his way silently and suddenly came upon Lucy's horse. He ducked back behind a rock and prayed the horse wouldn't give him away. He waited, straining his ears. A faint murmur of voices came to him and he carefully peered out from behind the rock. About fifty feet away he could make out the mouth of a cave. It glowed faintly as if a fire were burning inside.

He drew his gun and made a dash for the cave. The horse whinnied about the same time he hit the mouth of the cave. Inside, two figures looked up swiftly in terror.

"Don't move!" Jim warned and strode quickly to the man who sat beside Lucy and relieved him of his gun. Then stepping back he looked at the pair. Lucy's face was drained of all color while her eyes despised him. Jim felt something pull at his insides at the look in her eyes. It was his job, wasn't it? he asked himself.

He swung his eyes to her brother and was shocked at what he saw. This man didn't look much like the boy whose picture was on the Wanted poster. The picture showed a round cheeked blonde boy in his late teens. It was hard for Jim to believe that boy and this man were one and the same person.

The past year seemed to have aged him ten years. The round cheeks were hollow and there were tight lines around the mouth. The blue eyes were sunken and rimmed with black circles.

"Are you Chuck Sands?" Jim asked.

"That's right," the boy said wearily.

"I'm a U.S. Marshal. You're under arrest."

Lucy gasped and her eyes grew wide. Then she put out a hand imploringly and said, "Please, Jim. Don't do anything until you've heard his story."

"Never mind, Sis, you're wasting your time," Chuck Sands said impatiently. "He won't listen."

JIM STARED at them both for a long moment. It wasn't his job to listen. That was for a judge and jury, but Lucy's outstretched hand and the way she had said "Please, Jim," stirred him. He told himself there was no harm in listening. There would be enough bitterness between him and Lucy when this thing was over. He could do this much.

"I'll listen," he said brusquely. He thought he saw Lucy relax a little but her brother remained rigid.

"I didn't gun George Sims down in cold blood," Chuck Sands said. "He drew first. It's true I had threatened him. He and Mart Russell had come to town a few days before and started right in bothering Lucy. They were in that saloon from the time it opened in the morning until it closed at night. I didn't like the way they looked at Lucy or some of the things they said.

"Sims was the worst. It happened to be him I threatened but it might just as well have been Mart Russell.

They were in the saloon drinking. They'd been in there all day and were pretty drunk. I heard a remark Sims made as Lucy walked by their table and that's when I threatened him. I could have killed him right there. I was mad enough. But I didn't." His eyes burned on the firelight and he repeated, "I didn't."

Jim suddenly felt as if he could have killed George Sims himself for his behavior toward Lucy.

"The next afternoon," Chuck continued, "I ran across them in back of the saloon. They were still drunk. Sims laughed at me. He thought it was funny for me, a boy, to be threatening him. They were both laughing and then all of a sudden I saw Sims start for his gun. I guess he didn't know how fast I was. Anyway, he was laying there dead before any of us knew what happened. I kept watching Mart Russell expecting him to draw too, but he didn't."

Chuck Sands paused as if too tired to go on. Lucy put an encouraging hand on his arm. "The sound of the shot brought everybody outdoors," he went on finally. "They saw me standin' there with gun in hand and Sims laying there dead with his gun only part way out of his holster."

He shook his head slowly. "They wouldn't listen to my story after Mart Russell up and yelled I shot Sims down in cold blood. The whole town knows I've got a temper and they all know I've been practicing my draw since I was ten years old. They all knew about me threatening Sims the night before too. I talked till I was blue in the face but it didn't do no good.

"I wasn't about to be hung for a killin' I didn't do so I managed to break out of jail that night and lit out for the Border."

His shoulders sagged now. "I got sick of runnin', dodging the law and bein' away from my family. And all for no reason. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I came back. I made up my mind I'd clear myself or die trying. Anything was better than livin' the way I was. I've been wanting to go down into town and get the truth from Mart Russell if I had to choke it out of him. Lucy here wouldn't let me."

BROTHER and sister exchanged a long look and their love and affection was plain to see.

Lucy said, "It's nearly killed Dad already, having Chuck in all this trouble. If he got into more trouble or got himself killed, it would finish Dad." Her eyes were dark with worry as they met Jim's. "Can't you help us?"

Her plea went straight to Jim's heart. He told himself he was a fool, that he was going soft because of a girl but it didn't help. He told himself it wasn't just Lucy that had got under his skin. Her brother's story had the ring of truth. He shoved his gun back in his holster and said, "All right. I'll see what I can do."

Lucy's lips opened slightly and tears sprang to her eyes. Her voice trembled as she said, "Thank you. Oh, thank you."

Jim handed Chuck's gun back to him. "I'll start working on this first thing in the morning." He turned to go.

"Wait!" Lucy called to him. "I'll ride back with you."

He nodded and stepped outside the cave while she said goodbye to her brother. A few minutes later she came out, mounted and Jim led her horse down the rocks. When they reached the brakes Jim mounted his horse and they rode off together.

They didn't talk much. Jim could feel that Lucy felt a new shyness toward him. He couldn't think how to ease it and besides his mind was busy going over Chuck's story. Finally, aware that the silence between them had become uncomfortably long, he reached over and slowed her horse as he reined his. "Why are you riding back to town with me? Don't you trust me?"

"Yes, I trust you. It's just that I'm

always afraid someone will see me riding out of town or coming back. I thought if we came back together and were seen, no one would suspect anything."

"Except a romance," Jim said grinning. "Is that the only reason?"

It took her a long time to answer. As the seconds crawled by Jim felt his heart begin to pound. At last she murmured "Yes" in a voice so low he hardly heard her.

They didn't speak for the rest of the ride. Lucy kept her eyes straight ahead and Jim tried to talk some sense into himself. Her answer had told him more than he wanted to know. For the hundredth time he told himself he was asking for trouble if he let himself think too much of this girl.

But when he helped her dismount in the shed behind the saloon he forgot all the things he had told himself and kissed her. It was the worst thing he could have done because when she returned his kiss he knew it was too late to turn back. When she finally pulled away Jim could tell she was on the verge of tears. She grasped his shoulders with both hands as if to force him to accept the words she spoke with such desperate intensity. "Chuck is innocent. You've got to believe him."

Jim nodded. "I hope you're right. You don't know how much I hope you're right. Goodnight, Lucy."

He left her and took his horse to the livery barn. Later, lying on the bed in his room, he found he couldn't sleep. He had never gotten so involved in a case before. Right or wrong he had to give the boy a chance. For Lucy's sake if not for anyone else's.

HE HAD TO wait until the next evening before he could take any action. He had no chance to see Mart Russell until then. He was surprised to see him turn up for supper at the boarding house. He usually took his meals at the saloon. When Mart finished eating and got up to leave the table, Jim rose too and maneuvered

him out to the porch. The redhaired man seemed to welcome the chance to talk to someone. They sat down on the top step and Jim built himself a cigarette, offering the makings to Mart Russell when he was through.

"How come you aren't eating down at the saloon tonight?" Jim asked him. "I thought you were trying to make time with the Sands girl."

Mart's red face darkened a shade. "I gave that up as of today. That little witch has turned up her nose at me just once too often. I'll show her!"

There was an unmistakable threat in his raspy voice and Jim pricked up his ears. "What do you mean?" he asked keeping his voice just mildly interested.

"You just wait and see," Mart Russell said nodding confidently. "I'll show her she can't spit in my eye. You ever hear about her brother?"

"He shot your best friend, didn't he?"

"That's right. He broke jail and lit out but I got a hunch he'll be back someday."

He might as well have gone on to say, "And when he does—" because Jim got the impression that's what he was thinking. Did he mean he planned to kill him when and if he did return? But why? Was it revenge for his friend's death or for Lucy's snubbing of him. Then, like lightning it hit him. It might have been for either or both of those reasons but he was as sure as he could be of anything that this man was after the price that was on Chuck Sands' head. Five thousand dollars was enough to tempt a better man than Mart Russell. And five thousand

dollars would make his revenge all the sweeter.

Jim reasoned to himself that this gave him something to work with. The plan that formed swiftly in his mind was dangerous, but with the memory of Lucy's kiss still strong in his mind, Jim knew the time had come for drastic action.

He drew deeply on his cigarette and shook his head. "It's too bad you aren't interested in her any more. I thought if you were I had some news that might help. The last couple of nights she's taken a ride out toward the brakes. If a man was interested he might make something out of that. Maybe a moonlight ride would soften her up some."

Mart Russell took the bait like a hungry bass. He stared at Jim, his lashless eyes sharp and his chapped lips hanging loose. Then he recovered himself and asked suspiciously, "How come you ain't after her yourself?"

Jim laughed heartily and stood up. "Me? I like my life just like it is. I don't want to get mixed up with no woman." He tapped Mart's shoulder. "And if you're smart, you won't get mixed up with any either."

Mart Russell scarcely heard him. He didn't even hear Jim go back inside the house. Jim went up to his room and lay down upon the bed. There wasn't anything to do now but wait.

A COUPLE hours after dark he got his horse and rode out to the brakes. He hid his horse in the rocks and silently climbed toward the cave on foot. As he approached it he cast his eyes around for the best place to hide. There was a huge rock ending in a turret shape at the top just a few steps from the mouth of the cave. He hid there and leaned back to do some more waiting. He wasn't even sure Lucy would come tonight but he was betting on it.

After an hour had passed he began to get cramped and wished he had a cigarette but that would have given him away for sure. He stretched his stiff muscles carefully and then settled back again.

He'd been there several hours when he heard a horse approaching. When it got close enough he could see it was Lucy. She tied her horse where she had tied it the night before and walked into the cave. The murmur of their voices rose and fell as he continued his waiting. He was alert now, his ears straining for the faintest sound. It wasn't long before he heard it. A boot striking against rock. He flattened himself against the rock and peered carefully along one edge. There was no doubt about the dark figure slipping up to the cave. It was Mart Russell.

Jim's breath quickened and he drew his gun, careful not to make a sound. Mart Russell leaped through the cave opening and shouted "Get your hands up, both of you!"

Jim heard Lucy's stifled scream followed by a muffled oath that must have come from Chuck Sands.

"Well, well, isn't this cozy," Mart Russell's hoarse voice said sarcastically.

"You followed me," Lucy accused bitterly. "Oh, Chuck, I'm so sorry. I was careless tonight I know I was. I was thinking about something else."

Jim was certain he could have told them what it was she had been thinking about.

"That's all right, Sis," her brother said quickly, trying to still the panic in her voice. "I've been wanting to meet this liar face to face anyway."

Mart Russell's chuckle was ugly. "Talk big while you can, boy, I plan on getting that reward that's on your head."

"No!" Lucy cried and at the same moment Mart Russell's voice whipped out, "Don't move. Stay where you are."

A few seconds later he laughed. "If your sister here had been nicer to me I might not be out here now. But I got a little tired of her treatin' me like I was dirt."

"You been botherin' my sister!"

Chuck Sands shouted. "Lucy, why didn't you tell me? I'd have killed him!"

"Just like you killed George?" Mart Russell asked.

"You know as well as I do he started to draw first."

"Maybe I do, but nobody's ever going to hear me say it. Kinda funny, ain't it? Here I am—going to collect a reward for a man I could clear in two minutes time."

"You dirty, rotten—"

"No, Chuck! No!" Lucy screamed.

JIM SPRANG from his rock to the mouth of the cave firing as he jumped. Mart Russell's hands groped for air about the time he squeezed the trigger and the bullet whined as it hit rock. He spun around, his eyes wide, his hands groping toward his middle. Then he fell heavily to the floor of the cave. Jim moved toward him and half lifted him with the toe of his boot. That one look was enough.

"I guess he won't be causing any more trouble for anyone."

Lucy collapsed in a heap, sobbing hysterically. Jim and Chuck both went quickly to her but Chuck hung back and let Jim lift her up. "There, there, Lucy. Everything's all right now. I heard every word. Chuck doesn't have anything to worry about any more. He's as good as free."

She clung to him until she quieted and then she went to her brother and kissed him. "Let's get back to town as soon as we can. We've got to tell Dad you're home again— for good."

She smiled through her tears at them both. "Thanks, Jim," she said softly.

"Don't mention it. And my real name is Ben Hunter. Think you can get used to the idea of calling me Ben."

"I think so," she said and her face told him how much she liked the idea.

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by

Donna Reece

Marge Bradley had stopped her foreman from hanging this suspected rustler, but now she was ready to let Lafe Peters finish the job on her killer suitor!

AS THEIR rough hands jammed a lariat noose round his neck, Jay Wallis didn't feel the rawhide cutting into his wrists. One thought hammered at his temples with his pounding pulse. Failure! And the taste of failure was bitter against his tongue, clutched at his throat under the hemp loop. He'd failed miserably and completely at the task he'd set himself! Failed Ed!

Jay wasn't afraid to die. Death was a necessary evil and an ever-present risk in the calling he'd chosen. But to die like this, knowing he'd only made his brother Ed's desperate situation infinitely worse!

The two B-bar-M hands did their work quickly and efficiently under the fixed gaze of the man who sat his saddle with hand on gun-butt. They had little liking for this business, and the Arizona moon that flooded down upon the live-oak hidden by a ring of junipers was all too bright. But the grim eyes of the man in grey Stetson and tooled Frazer saddle with its silver mountings roweled them to haste.

Lafe Peters rodded the B-bar-M with hand of steel. Gloved steel when he dealt with the crippled Amos Bradley, or his daughter Marge—who was giving orders for her father since he'd had the stroke. But the glove was discarded when Peters ruled alone the punchers of the giant spread that covered the north half of Cuba Basin.

That afternoon, Lafe Peters and his two men had come upon Jay Wallis hunkered down on the alkali floor of a barranca not half a mile north of Ed's Lazy W line. Come upon him red-handed! Jay's Colt .45 was still blowing smoke rings over the body of a B-bar-M puncher with a gaping hole through his forehead! Close beside him was a small fire, a roped calf, a set of brand-changing irons, and the brand on the calf was a recent Lazy W!

In vain Jay swore that he'd surprised the man with the calf and shot

to save his life when the brander drew. Grimly silent, Peters had led him back to hacienda, made the accusation before Amos Bradley and Marge. Then Lafe Peters had sprung the cinching revelation: this viper that Bradley had hired two weeks back under the name of Bert Raymond, was really Ed Wallis' brother. Ed Wallis, whose smaller spread joined borders with the B-bar-M on the south, and whom Bradley held responsible for his constantly-disappearing stock!

Immovable as black rock, Peters watched his men set Jay astride Uncomphagre's rump, toss lariat over live-oak branch, whip it round the trunk. His left hand rose to give the signal.

Abruptly a gun belched flame, and the slug clipped the line in two where it crossed the branch!

"Drop yore gun!"

Sudden as it was unexpected, the order leaped from the blackness of the junipers. Jay felt a queer thrill of recognition. Lafe Peters' lightning wrist froze in mid-draw and his gun fell glinting, for he too knew those calm, vibrant tones!

The voice was the voice of Marge Bradley!

AS SHE RODE out into the moonlight to face Peters, Jay Wallis recalled vividly that first day when she had stood on the B-bar-M veranda, the ring of command in her voice as she told her foreman that Amos had decided to hire Jay. They had made a picture these two. Lafe Peters, with his coal-black hair, grey-green eyes, and tall, trim figure, handsome in a big, raw-boned sort of way. Marge Bradley's erect shoulders, capable curves, and fine straight waist under flannel shirt and levis, her hair so dark as almost to hide the autumn fires that gave it its luster.

Marge's skin was the copper-bronze sort that never sunburns or tans much, and the lights that changed in the depths of her brown eyes as she told Peters, had spoken more than orders! The foreman's smile had responded with a flash of white teeth. But Jay thought the girl was too independent for any man to loop his dally onto just yet.

Now her imperious voice was sharp with anger and disappointment.

"Lafe Peters! Your orders was to ride this hombre to the B-bar-M line, and caution him never tuh bring his lyin' carcass back into Cuba Basin!"

"Shore, Miss, but I figgered I'd ought tuh take matters in my own hands. There's jest one way of makin' certain he ain't comin' back. An' he's earned it, plenty!"

Peters choked down resentment as well as he could.

"Since when was you tellin' Amos Bradley what tuh do? There's ways the law could of took care of this if that's what he'd wanted. We aim tuh have no killing on this spread that ain't necessary!"

"There's things goes on round any cow-outfit a woman don't know nothin' about, Miss. An' it's better for her she shouldn't!"

"Amos Bradley's givin' the B-bar-M orders, Lafe Peters, an' I aim tuh see they're carried out! Take yore cow-pokes back tuh the bunkhouse, an' don't lose yore way! I'm tendin' tuh this hombre!"

Seething with inward rage, Peters rode off west with his men. Tight-lipped and cold as ice, Marge Bradley freed the noose around Jay's neck but left his hands lashed.

"Git in yore saddle and head south." Her revolver pointed the way. "I'm stayin' right behind you!"

For an hour they rode in frozen silence to the edge of the B-bar-M. Then Marge rapped out her parting shot.

"Reckon I don't need tuh repeat them orders. Keep travelin' and don't never come back, Killer!"

MORNING saw a solitary rider jogging steadily south across the parched and sandy ground swells of the lower basin. Back of him lay the high country of slopes and foothills of the Horse Creek Range. Here there was only sparse bunch grass, but up there was good grass on the plateaus, and timbered ravines cut back into fertile mountain parks that grew lush grass even in time of drought. Ahead were Cuba and the pass that was to take him out of Cuba Basin for good.

A shock of sandy hair pushed out from under his sombrero hid the anger that lay deep in Jay's blue eyes. The usual sunny look of his tanned, boyish face was broken by lines of weariness and failure. The square set of the chin made him look more than his twenty-three years. Under him Uncomphagre, sorrel with long, rangey legs and big-barreled chest, devoured miles in great strides, Honey-colored mane and tail blew in the hot wind and the bronc seemed to share his rider's thoughts as he did his motions.

Marge Bradley had saved little for him but his neck. After chaffing in two the rawhide that bound his wrists. Jay Wallis had spread his bed-roll under the tarnished stars in the hot night, and had time to do plenty of thinking.

Why wouldn't Ed listen to reason and sell the Lazy W to Amos Bradley, when Bradley had offered him a fair price for it? That's what he'd have done if he'd been in Ed's boots. Too well, Jay knew the devastating losses that Ed suffered each dry season because most of the water lay to the north on B-bar-M range. It was only Ed's dogged determination that had kept the Lazy W swinging at all. But his older brother was born stubborn and hung on.

ON LEAVE from the Texas Rangers and coming as a stranger to Cuba Basin, Jay had thought he saw a way to help. Back in Texas, Ed had done everything for him, been all the family he had left. Now he'd sure do anything he could for Ed.

Since a year ago, just about when Amos Bradley had that stroke, the bad situation at the Lazy W had become desperate. Cattle were disappearing, a few at a time but with deadly regularity. Ed figured, he told Jay, that old Amos, having failed to buy him out, was trying to force him to sell by other means. That he'd put his daughter Marge to repping for him, because Ed wouldn't dare accuse a woman. But worst of anything, Bradley had the confound gall to claim that he, Ed Wallis, was stealing B-bar-M stock!

So Jay had insisted on hiring himself to the Bradley outfit to see what he could learn from the inside. He'd told Ed it could do no harm to try, but he'd been wrong, dreadfully wrong, for somehow Lafe Peters had found out that he was Ed's brother! This afternoon in the barranca he'd thought he had his evidence, but it had boomeranged. And his staying in Cuba Basin would only give the Bradleys the better grounds for accusing Ed.

Yes, he figured he owed it to Ed to smother his own smoldering hate and get out. He'd have to quit the rangers, too, wouldn't be right to hang onto that job after this failure. But it didn't matter what happened to him the way he felt now.

Besides Ed's desperate fix, there were two other parts of the unfinished picture that gnawed at his peace of mind. Amos and Marge Bradley might be hard as nails, but Jay couldn't bring himself to believe they were low-down enough to play such a sneaking game. And there was something dead wrong about Marge falling for an hombre like Peters!

NEAR THE scorched southern end of Cuba Basin, which was walled in on the north by the Horse Creek Range, on the east and south by arid,

forbidding mountains, and on the west by deeply eroded alkali badlands, squatted the 'dobe cowtown of Cuba. Its one street was chiefly populated by starving mongrels and an occasional shifty-eyed, tight-lipped cow-poke, and boasted a couple of honkey-tonkey joints and two-three saloons in which liquor was bad and plentiful and women were bad and scarce. Its last lawman had died some time back and the citizens hadn't bothered to replace him; they knew an act of God when they saw one.

Down this street with its caked 'dobe mud cracked and warped and life stifled into torpor by the withering desert sun, Uncomphagre carried Jay Wallis. He'd better stop for food before riding the sixty miles to Holbrook. Jay hitched Uncomphagre in the shadow on the west of the Ten Strike Cafe and started for the steps. Two of Cuba's representative citizens came out, talking. Jay pulled up short and strained his ears.

"So they finally drilled Ed Wallis."

"Yeah. Sent hime home plumb full of lead, roped to his hoss, long beef fashion. Must of been stickin' his nose in where he weren't welcome."

As they passed out of earshot, Jay had turned and was striding toward Uncomphagre. A-saddle he headed the sorrel up the rough wagon road that led to the pass and Holbrook. Half a mile out of town he cut from the road and circled west.

The lines of trouble and worry in his face had vanished. Instead, its tanned skin stretched taut over a skeleton of rigid bone. Lips were narrowed to a slitted line and blue eyes smoked with hot, dry fury.

Ed's death made him owner of the Lazy W and he was going back there to play out Ed's hand! That spread couldn't be bought for twenty times its value! Jay would run it in the teeth of any odds! He was going on running it till he found Ed's murderers and cleared him forever from the charge of rustling! And he was going to pay off those murderers regardless who stood back of them! The Bradleys couldn't stop him if they throwed all hell in his path!

AS JAY SWUNG down from Uncomphagre in front of the Lazy W corral, a wirey, weatherbeaten man of about forty in saddle-worn boots and levis met him. Lithe movements, high cheekbones, and dark impassive face hinted of his Jicarilla-Apache mother. Behind the emotionless mask, Jay read the hurt, savage look like a trapped animal's in his wild black eyes that were never still. He was Trinchera Charlie. Ed's foreman and blood-brother.

"Good!" he grunted. "Come back to fight!"

"You got it, Trinchera," Ed gritted. "If we can find 'em!"

"Rustlers leave sign. Ed follow."

"Then I reckon you shore kin foller it, too!"

From the corral corner behind Trinchera rolled a hard, thick-set puncher with bowed, bandy legs. His nose had been broken and half an ear ripped off in combat, and black eyebrows met in the middle across a flat nose-bridge. Near-set eyes accentuated the gorilla look of the smart face. These fastened upon Jay's.

"Saddle Pinta, for me, Fiesta. Jay an' me ride pronto."

The Mex stood his tracks, bandy legs well spread, thumbs hooked in gun belt.

"Seems like you was in damn big hurry to own the Lazy W, *Mister* Jay Wallis, ridin' fer Bradley. Might be *you* knowed who killed yore brother!"

Ten feet away, Fiesta had moved out from behind Trinchera, was waiting for Jay's draw.

All the pent-up anger in Jay's taut body surged into his lightning rush. With the blurred speed of a mule's striking hoof, he doubled and lunged for Fiesta's midriff. Six-gun dropped

from black hand as the Mex's deflected slug plowed up a small cyclone of dust. Sheer unexpectedness gave Jay the spit-second he needed.

As his swinging left pounded into Fiesta's ribs, driving him back, Jay's right hand gripped the Mex's other gun, flung it away.

Fiesta found feet and plunged back at him, gorilla face warped with hate, slugging a vicious left to Jay's gut while his right glanced below the Texan's eye, drawing a stream of blood. Jay threw a series of lightning punches and jabs, driving Fiesta back. Then he feinted a left and put all the pile-driving power of his right shoulder behind a blow that sank home in the Mex's body, followed through with a left arced at Fiesta's swart face. The Mex staggered back, suddenly swung one of his bowed legs with cruel, pointed boot toe.

PARALYZING pain folded Jay's tall body as the boot sank into his groin. Leering, the Mex sprang after him with gut-jab that laid him back flat. Through the wave of searing, nauseating pain that sucked all his force, Jay felt a knee jolt into his belt and thumbs feeling for his eyes in the choking dust.

As the wave of pain receded, Jay drew knees to chest by prodigious effort and drove boots with every remaining ounce of power. Fiesta catapulted backward. By sheer will power Jay forced himself back to his feet, hooked all the dynamite in his right fist under the Mex's chin, followed by a sledgehammer left into that tough sinewy midriff. With a hiss of escaping wind, Fiesta settled backwards into the dust.

Despite his bleeding eye and the dull throbbing ache at his groin, Jay felt better. He'd needed something like this to loosen the tension. With a grim grin he turned to Trinchera who was collecting the Mex's hardware. Trinchera's black eyes met his in stolid approval.

"Come back to fight! Fiesta learn who's boss!"

"Yeah," Jay agreed. "But I didn't much like the way he asked for it!"

Together they walked to the ranch house, entered the room where Ed's body lay covered on a table. Jay raised the edge of the blanket. Even in death Ed Wallis' face kept the square-jawed, unsmiling determination with which he'd fought his bitter battles. Jay covered him again. His dry eyes sought Trinchera's. The foreman's expression never changed, but he put out a lean right hand and Jay gripped it solemnly.

BACK-TRACKING the horse that had brought the dead man in, Trinchera crossed the north line of the Lazy W, with Uncomphagre tailing him. Jay Wallis marveled at the miraculous skill of the foreman's tracking. Mud flats were baked to hard, rock-like pan frosted with the white alkali rime, and the sign had been crossed and recrossed by most of Ed's remaining stock which drifted near the B-bar-M line in search of what water there was. But Trinchera's desert-bred eyes never faltered.

The dim trace followed the bed of a shallow, eroded valley that climbed gradually into the table-land that was the south-west corner of the immense B-bar-M range. Jay felt no surprise; he'd half-expected the murder trail would lead onto Bradley land.

Abruptly Trinchera hauled up with a satisfied grunt. Here the sign was plain enough even for Jay to read. Deep in the trampled alkali were the marks where Ed's horse had been pulled to a quick halt at the challenge. Back of him, hidden in the mouth of a barranca, Trinchera pointed to the boot marks of the bushwhack party and a little up the barranca the sign of three horses left standing.

In the barranca mouth were two

brass ends from exploded Winchester cartridges. Fifteen feet from where Ed had halted were six more from a .45. That was all. For a hundred yards in every direction the valley floor was a jumbled maze of crossed-up tracks from horses being ridden back and forth in all directions.

Neither man said anything, but Jay's eyes burned dry and hot, and his face had grown rigid again.

Trinchera scouted the valley rims. First the east toward the B-bar-M hacienda. Then back down the west rim. Jay stood guard. At the end of half an hour the foreman gave a low call.

"Come!"

Silently he pointed, black eyes roving restlessly. Up a hard limestone shelf climbed the dim sign. Four or five slight scars where recent hooves had scored the soft rock. Thence across an area of harder shale on the mesa top, headed straight west for the barren, forbidding chaos of the badlands!

Now they had left the valley, the track was totally lost for a white man's eyes, but those wonderful black one's of Trinchera's led them steadily west. A disturbed rock, a shallow hoof mark sanded over by the desert wind, but it was enough. At the end of a mile Trinchera found a shallow depression with a patch of sandy gravel where the sign of three horses was still plain.

AFTER TWO miles Jay had begun to question whether the foreman's relentless purpose had not led him to imagine sign where none existed. Then Trinchera cut sharply to the right and over the brink of a broad arroyo. The skid-tracks showed clearly where the horses had coasted down the steep wall.

An ejaculation of astonishment burst from Wallis' tight-drawn lips. This arroyo must drain into the valley that they had followed, the alkali rim of its floor was trampled from bank to bank with the hooves of many cattle going west!

This then was the answer to one of the gnawing questions that harassed him. B-bar-M cattle were being rustled into the badlands and Ed had followed the trace of some of his own stock that had been hazed across Bradley range to join the herd. That was why Amos Bradley and Ed had been accusing each other of rustling!

Jay's set face drew tighter and his steel-blue eyes flashed his cold relentless purpose now that a pattern began to appear in the confused jumble of happening through which he'd been forging blindly. If his luck held, he'd be able to return and prove Ed's innocence to the Bradleys. But first and very soon would come the moment he lived for to identify Ed's killers at the end of the murder trail and pay them off in lead!

The killer's tracks merged into the trampled cattle trail on the arroyo bed and became indistinguishable from a hundred others. But Trinchera led on, watching warily both banks for a possible break where they might turn off. The country grew stark and volcanic. At rare intervals a stunted mesquite or vinegar bush clung to its foothold in a crevice. Then even this desert vegetation ceased. An intricate maze of arroyos branched and twisted and rejoined each other among a tangle of cliffs and pinnacles of the unscalable, greasy clay-rock. Always the cattle had kept to a general westerly direction and always Trinchera searched the branches for possible sign turning from their track.

At last, just as falling darkness was about to make further tracking impossible even for his amazing eyes, he beckoned Jay to follow him in silence and turned from the cattle trail into a twisting canyon of an arroyo in which stirrups cut clay on either flank. After a quarter mile's meandering, it ended abruptly in a steep-walled hole perhaps thirty yards in extent, with a tiny clump of tender green foliage under the lime-stone rim-rock that spelt water. On its floor crouched a squat adobe

hut with roof of poles and 'dobe mud and lit lantern behind window.

Hidden in the throat of the arroyo, Jay whispered his plans to Trinchera. The foreman gave a grunt of dissatisfaction and headed back for the Lazy W.

HANDS LIFTED to shoulder level, Jay Wallis rode Uncomphagre slowly up to the hut door, aware that every step of his advance would be covered. Regardless of risk, he must learn who had done the killing. He was a stranger to all in Cuba Basin except the B-bar-M and Ed's handful of punchers, so these rustlers could not know him.

"Quien 'sta!"

Jay knew the challenge would be backed up by an unseen gun muzzle. Inside the lantern snuffed out.

"Amigo!" he answered evenly swinging down from his bronc.

Arms still lifted, he walked deliberately through that black doorway, stooping under the low lintel.

Someone struck a match, lit the lantern. If the light had been better, Jay's slight start would have given him away!

The two men that faced him across the table on which their guns lay were not the oridnary brand of rustlers. As a Texas Ranger he was familiar with the descriptions of most notorious owlhoot leaders. That short, thick-lipped hombre with his head permanently twisted slantwise near his left shoulder where a slug had severed the neck tendon would be Twist Drago! And the huge, crafty-eyed man in black shirt and sombrero, who looked like a professional gambler. That must be Raton Clark, Drago's partner and the brains behind numberless daring bank raids and stage-coach hold-ups the pair had pulled off!

Wallis knew his chance of living through the next ten minutes hung upon convincing Clark that he was there to play their game and could be useful to them. But he took out the makings and built himself a quirly before breaking silence. Holding match in right hand and dragging thumb-nail across it till it flamed up, Jay drawled.

"Figgered you boys might be able to use an extry gun-toter in yore business."

A three-day growth of scraggly beard, marks of Fiesta's fists in his face, and no sleep for thirty-six hours all helped to make Jay look like a wanderer from the long tails. His rosewood gun butts were well-polished with use.

THERE WERE moments of silence while they scrutinized him.

"How'd you git in here?" purred the man in the black sombrero at last.

"Followed yore trail. There's plenty uh yore friends that'll tell the right man where yo're workin', Clark. You'nd Drago's too famous tuh disappear. Mebbyso you've heard the name uh Fargo Manders."

"Vinegaroons got Manders down in Texas three weeks back!"

Clark's voice was sharper.

"Yuh mean they throwed some lead into him. But it didn't stick, Clark!"

"Seems like a dead man orta be useful tuh *you*. Cut me in on them cattle yo're handlin', an' I can open the Phoenix Trust in Holbrook for you!"

Drago scowled at Clark. Clark said slowly.

"Reckon it won't hurt us none tuh try. Yore the hombre's goin' tuh soak up the slugs if anythin' busts loose, Manders. Put yore bed roll on that bunk in the corner."

Jay went for his bed roll. He was still covered, of course. Outside he could hear a horse coming fast up the arroyo. The rider must have slipped aside in the outer canyon and let Trinchera pass him. Jay went in and dumped his bedroll on the bunk.

Clark and Drago made no move when the rider strode into the hut. Jay stiffened in his shadowy corner. The man was Lafe Peters!

"Got an hombre here, Peters, says he's Fargo Manders." Clark purred. "Wants tuh help us pull a bank job."

Several things happened at once. Jay shot the lantern out, threw himself under the bunk. Peters' gun spurted yellow flame. The slug tore into the adobe above Jay's head, followed instantly by two rapid-fire explosions from another quarter. Gun at arm's length, Jay drove a slug in that direction. A scream of pain. Silence. Air choked with acrid gunfumes. No man dared shoot.

Peters must still be where he'd halted, beside the door. By painful inches Jay got to his knees, grasped the leg of the stool beside him. Outlined in lesser blackness, he could make out the door and window. Six feet along the wall from him someone cleared fumes from throat. Over beside the door a gun blazed at the slight sound. Jay hurled the stool through the window!

Peters rasped a curse, jumped through the door. Jav could hear his boot running round the corner toward the window.

Jay dove across floor, scrabbled out the door on all fours, dashed for the hitch-rail and Uncomphagre, untied him and leaped a-saddle. Two guns blazed after him, one from the doorway and the other from the hut corner. Not shooting to offer further target, he pounded for the arroyo that led out.

Where the arroyo opened into the broader canyon that held the cattle trail, Wallis stopped to listen for sounds of pursuit. He waited five minutes. Nothing. Then abruptly he broke into a bitter laugh. There wouldn't be any pursuit!

At least one of the outlaws was badly wounded and Peters wouldn't be so foolhardy to risk those miles of tortuous, black chasms with a thousand corners built for ambush, even if the other outlaw could still ride. He would wait for dawn light to safeguard his journey!

That gave Jay Wallis the chance he must take to get proof of who'd murdered Ed. The proof the rustler's hideout had failed to yield. The chance to put his neck back in the noose from which it had been saved last night!

Wallis knew he was risking an outlaw's death. It was the unwritten law of the range. But he didn't hesitate. He must reach the B-bar-M first!

IT WAS PAST midnight when Jay hid Uncomphagre in the mesquite and made his way on foot to the Bradley's hacienda. But a light still burned in their living room. Marge must be reading to Amos Bradley. Sometimes at night the crippled leg pained him so he couldn't sleep.

Without knocking he crossed the threshold of the owners who'd forbidden him ever again to appear in Cuba Basin under pain of death! Silently he passed through the darkened house and stood framed in the doorway. The lamplight fell on his torn shirt, his face gashed and smeared with blood and dirt.

Old Amos, facing him, made no sound, but his pain-creased face froze in a stern, harsh mask. Marge saw it and turned with a little gasping cry. Her hand snatched up an ivory-butted Colt from the table beside her.

"Killer! So Lafe was right! Well, I made the mistake once of saving yore neck, but that ain't goin' to happen again!"

"Hold on there, Miss Bradley. I aim to explain about them cattle yo're losin'!"

"Let him talk, Marge. That ought to be right interestin' tuh hear. From a rustler!"

Amos' voice was grim.

In brief, graphic sentences Jay Willis pictured for them the arroyo cattle trail he'd followed into the badlands. The hideout. The two men, Drago and Clark. Then he sprang to his ace in the hole. Peters' arrival!

The fierce old man's eyes burned into his.

"'Pears like yo're right well acquainted with them two outlaws, Wallis! If Peters found them, he must uh traced some B-bar-M stock, an' jest naturally started shootin' when he seen *you!*"

Marge's copper-colored face flushed a deeper bronze at Jay's implication of Peters' treachery. Her deep brown eyes flashed danger signals.

"Lafe told us this afternoon that you'd stayed on in Cuba Basin! Said you was a proven killer an' he figgered you'd bushwhacked yor brother, so's you could take over the Lazy W!"

Killed his brother! This bitter thrust wrenched out by the angry girl was the second time in twelve hours he'd been accused of it! Fiesta had been the first and had payed the price, but you couldn't silence a woman with your fists! Now he saw what Ed had meant about Marge being a shield for Amos!

Before answering their charges, Wallis built a smoke. He'd played his last card and lost. Again failure and death stared him in the face!

SUDDENLY his whirling brain saw new light in Marge Bradley's stinging accusation. Peters had not been at the Lazy W. How had he known of Jay's return there?

A plan, probably fatal for him but one that might bring out the facts and settle Ed's score, took form. Lighting his smoke, he drawled.

"Them's fightin' words, Miss Bradley, an' all I ask for is the chance to prove yo're wrong. Call all yore hands together, an' let Peters explain with 'em there!"

Now Marge was thoroughly roused.

"Jest why should we give a rustler and a killer the chance to do any more killing? Tomorrow Lafe can finish the job I stopped him off from!"

But old Amos had lived longer than Marge, and he didn't altogether like the ramrod's attitude toward his daughter. Jay's plan would give him the chance to see how the man acted when challenged.

"Hold up a bit there, Marge. This feller'll be safe enough under lock 'nd key here. And if Peters ain't back in the mornin', there's ways to make a killer talk! I don't figger that Lafe Peters'll mind answerin' a few questions!"

AN ANGRY, dangerous mob of punchers milled in front of the B-bar-M hacienda. The ram-rod had just returned and news had gotten out that the Bradleys were harboring the rustler who'd killed one of their number. They meant to have his blood!

In the center, Lafe Peters stood grimly assured in grey Stetson and tight-fitting, expensive boots. Close around him were a knot of his hard-faced, gun-swift top-hands. Men of the same stamp as the brander Wallis had shot, who took Peters' orders and asked no questions.

From the back of the crowd somebody shouted.

"Bring out yore rustler! We'll answer for him this time!"

The door opened. Jay Wallis strode across the veranda. From behind him the rifles of Amos and Marge Bradley covered his every move. Wallis' mouth was a narrow line and his slitted eyes were fixed upon Lafe Peters' handsome, faintly sneering face.

The angry muttering died and every hand fingered a gun butt as Jay halted square in front of them on the top step, and spoke. His level voice was clean and cold as ice.

"Peters! You had Ed Wallis dry-gulched. And it's time for the payoff!"

For seconds no man drew breath. As Jay's eyes bore into him and he made no gun-move, Peters dropped half-drawn Colt back in holster, gave a scornful laugh.

"Looks like the killer wants to wipe blood off his hands afore he dies, boys!"

Jay's voice went on, hard and merciless.

"To most uh these men, Peters, yore just Bradley's ramrod. They don't know you, but I'm goin' to tell 'em all about you!"

"They don't know that one of yore waddies gunned me when I caught him blotting Ed's brand off a calf. And that you tried to hang me so's I couldn't talk!"

There were angry cries of "Rustler. Killer!"

Peters' sneering smile was triumphant. "Let him talk, boys! Reckon he'll tell plenty to hang him!"

"They don't know since Amos Bradley was crippled you've been rustlin' his stock to badlands outlaws, and layin' the blame on Ed. They don't know how you've been hazin' Eds cattle acrost the B-bar-M line afore deliverin' 'em, because you figgered Ed would blame the Bradleys and couldn't attack a woman!"

PUNCHERS shifted uneasily in the crowd. Peters' knot of gunnies drew closer around him. There had been some bunkhouse gossip, speedily stamped out under the ramrod's iron heel.

"They don't know you rode into Raton Clark's hideout last night to offer him more of Ed's stock as pay for his share in Ed's killing!"

Men's eyes fastened upon Lafe Peters' hands, thumbs thrust in gunbelt. His control was marvelous. Again he gave that confident, loose-lipped laugh. But Jay caught an edge to it which meant the chance thrust had gone home.

Deliberately Jay Wallis walked down the steps and straight toward Peters and his bodyguard. His blue eyes pierced the foreman's like needles of ice. The moment had arrived to gamble everything on his hunch.

"And Peters doesn't know how Trinchera's Apaches taught him to make men talk! Last night Fiesta told everything!"

Not even Jay foresaw the lightning chain of events his words unleashed.

Peters' smirk twisted to malevolent hate as he jabbed for his six-guns. Whatever else he might be, he was no coward. Jay's wrist was a blur of speed too fast for eyes to follow as his Colt's leaped out.

From behind the hacienda corner a squat figure jumped, landed bandy legs a-spraddle as he threw lead. His first slug tore off Jay's sombrero because Peters' shot had reached Jay's shoulder first, wrenching him out of its path. His second sprayed dirt as Fiesta crumpled forward, killed by a rifle behind him.

Wallis' .45 ripped into Lafe Peters' chest, twisting him half round so that his aim went wild. Jay's Colts spoke again and the slug creased Peters' skull. He dropped.

One of the gunnies' bullets found Jay's leg. It would have drilled his

forehead had not Marge Bradley's Winchester caught the marksman in time. Another gunny waited to take careful aim, buckled to earth before his gun exploded picked off by Trinchera from the ranch house corner.

"Drop yore guns all of you! I'll kill the next man that reaches for one!"

Old Amos Bradley's voice found again the thunderous power of his prime. Gunnies slank back. The shooting was over as abruptly as it had begun. The regular punchers of the big spread had not taken part. They had no love for Lafe Peters.

TRINCHERA helped Wallis to the veranda where they had laid Peters.

"Fiesta come to talk with Peters," he explained. "I follow sign. Shoot him none too quick!"

Marge had laid aside her Winchester and was doctoring their wounds, pressing cold cloths against Lafe Peters' head.

Minutes later the unconscious man's eyes opened, focused on Marge's face. The iron will that had rodded the B-bar-M fought off dizziness. Game to the last, he whispered.

"I'm done for, Miss, but I had it comin'. Drago and Clark and I got Ed Wallis when he trailed us too close. Jay killed Clark in the hideout, and I shot Drago by mistake. He died last night."

Overcome with the effort, he slumped down. Dead. At the end of a crooked trail, he'd tried to make some amends to the girl he'd cheated.

Marge Bradley turned a tear-stained face toward Wallis, put her hand on his arm. Her deep brown eyes spoke more than words could.

"I was wrong about you Jay, and I'm sorry," she said simply.

Behind his wrinkles, old Amos gave him a shrewd, quizzical look.

"Why not sell us the Lazy W, Wallis, and manage 'em both together for me? Figger you could take Peters' place?"

"That might kinda depend on Miss Bradley, sir!" Jay grinned back at him. "But I'd like to try!"

They yanked her off the stage — into the future!

There she was, doing her act at the burlesque theatre, when — whup! — she found herself in a strange room, surrounded by men and women she'd never seen before. There was a peculiar-looking machine, and — heavens! April Dawn had never been so shocked in her life! — no one present was wearing any clothes at all!

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Petticoat Fever

It was all wrong, what I did — but I loved Al Jardine!

I PINNED a length of heavy silk in a pannier effect over the skirt of Mrs. Dayton's half finished party dress and stood back from the dressmaker's dummy to look at it. I had to giggle. Mrs. Dayton had insisted, over our faint protests, on panniers because of a picture in Godey's Lady's Book. You don't argue much with a bank president's wife, but she did weigh two hundred and fifty pounds, and panniers, well!

The knock on the front door was hesitant and I called, "Come in," a little annoyed at the interruption. The dress had to be finished by Saturday and with Aunt Grace being laid up in her bedroom with an aching back, it was up to me.

The door opened slowly and I'd never seen the man who stood there in the late afternoon sunshine. If I ever had, I'd never have forgotten him. He was tall and broad shouldered. His chaps and plaid shirt were travel dusty and he had the brightest blue eyes I'd ever seen. I sensed the strength of him, yet there was a gentleness in him too. He wasn't brash and cocky like so many swaggering range riders, or the occasional gunslingers who came to Prairie Wells.

"Are you Miss Grace, the milliner?" he asked, pushing his broad brimmed hat farther back on his dark hair. His smile was self conscious. It was like a little boy's smile and tugged at my heart like no smile had ever done.

"That's my aunt. I'm Mindy Williams, her assistant. I'll have to do because she's ailing." I smiled back.

"I'm sorry, Miss," he said, "about your aunt, I mean. But I think you'll do just fine because of your age." He took a deep breath. "You see, I want to buy a hat."

"Seems like you've already got one." I teased and he flushed scarlet. I swept a bolt of cambric off a chair and onto the table already laden with hat forms, veiling, sprays of flowers and ribbons. "Suppose you tell me what my age has

to do with your hat?" I motioned him to a chair.

He looked real flustered and decided to stand. "It's a long story, Miss."

"I've got plenty of time," I said, not choosing to remember Mrs. Dayton. I was glad he wasn't going to leave though.

"Well, it's like this. I'd better tell you so's you'll know how to make the hat, and so's you'll understand Alice." He shifted from one foot to another. "You see, Alice is about your age and she thinks we've only got Indians and gunmen and massacres out here. That we're not civilized." He moved his hat around in his hands. "She thinks I ought to give up the range after we're married and live in Boston. She wants me to work for her father."

I BRISTLED. Indians indeed. Why, there hadn't been a raid for all of eight months, though some years back they'd been terrible. I should know, I was here. Furthermore, any girl who'd make such a demand wasn't near good enough for the tall man standing here. Anyone could tell a man like this would die living all cooped up in a city. It was right then I knew I hated Alice.

"Where did you meet her?" I asked.

"At trail-end back in Kansas," he said. "Her father's a railroad executive and she came to Wichita with him last year. So you see, Miss Mindy, I thought if you'd make me a real fine fancy bonnet, I'd send it to her as a present and she'd know that we aren't as uncivilized as she thinks we are. She'd believe me then that there're good stores in Prairie Wells. She'd change her mind and come out without further argument."

"I see," I said and I certainly did. But I didn't want to talk about Alice, I wanted to talk about him. "Who do you ride for?" I asked. "And how does it happen I haven't seen you around?" I knew again I wouldn't have forgotten him or his blue eyes that could send shivers through a girl.

He leaned back against the table, looking down at me. "I was up this way some years back and I liked the country. I guess I like mountains." He smiled slowly. "When I made my stake riding range in Texas and Arizona helped, I'll admit, by some lucky poker, I decided to come back and see if I could find me a spread in the valley."

"You don't sound like a steady man," I said with mock severity, though I could feel different from the look of him. "Gambling!"

"Only for my stake, Miss Mindy. And now if you'll make me a hat, you're to spare no expense. Make it a jim dandy, one that'll bring my girl out here quick."

"What color hair has she, how tall is she and what color eyes?" I asked.

He looked suddenly moonstruck. "She comes up to here," he measured way below his shoulders. "Her hair's not as yellow as yours, but then," he added defensively, "she doesn't get all the sun your hair gets to make it as bright and shiny. Her eyes are dark, but they don't snap the way yours do."

I was surprised that he'd noticed me at all, his thoughts being so tied up with Alice. "All right," I said crossly, "I'll do it."

I wanted him to go. I couldn't stand hearing any more about the girl. I just couldn't see her lording it over the nice folks here in Prairie Wells, and this blue eyed man was simply drooling over her. I sensed they wouldn't be happy. I knew she'd be the kind who'd nag him to give up ranching if an Indian as much as screeched. She'd fuss about the cold winters when she was snowbound with him at his ranch. And she'd fume about every single inconvenience. Clearly someone needed to rescue him from himself, and I couldn't see anyone doing it except me.

"You better come back here tomorrow when I'm not so busy with Mrs. Dalton," I said. I motioned to the form and I think he saw it for the first time because his eyes bugged in disbelief. "I'll get some hat trimmings and

shapes for you to see what you think looks like Alice."

I didn't even know his name, but the thought of seeing him tomorrow made my heart race, even though he was a spoken-for man.

"I'll be here," he promised, dropped his hat and finally made it to the door.

SUDDENLY I became aware that Aunt Grace was calling from her bedroom and I hurried to her. She raised herself with painful effort and I helped with the pillows.

"Did I hear a man's voice?" she asked, smoothing back her thin gray hair.

"You did," I said and told her what had happened, my voice trembling with excitement. She heard me out.

"He can't do it," she stated firmly. "No man can send that kind of a present. The girl's parents would never let her accept it, even if they are betrothed. They'd certainly think he was ignorant of conventions."

"Pooh," I said with fine disrespect. "You're old fashioned. It's a lovely gift."

"He can send her something else." Aunt Grace ignored my protest. "A bottle of cologne would accomplish the same purpose, wouldn't it?"

"I'm not so sure," I said slowly. I got up and walked out of the room. Criticism of my cowpuncher would about kill him. I knew that.

I couldn't settle down to Mrs. Dalton, so I went to my own room and changed into a crisp blue dress. I peeked in at my aunt. "I'm going to the mercentile. I just remembered something I want to get."

"Let me know what the cologne costs. We'll buy it and if it's here all pretty in a box, you can ease the young man into the idea without hurting anybody's feelings. And, honey, you're likely wasting your time. He's doubtless playing poker in some saloon and won't see you."

"He is not." I could feel myself blush. You don't fool Aunt Grace. She'd sensed I was interested in him like I hadn't been in anyone else. It's no wonder, she knows me very well.

She was my mother's sister and had taken care of me since I was ten. Indians had burned our ranch and my parents had been killed. At the time I'd been visiting in Prairie Wells. My aunt later sold the property and I'd lived with her. She'd been awfully good to me. One thing she'd done, she'd seen to it I had my own horse and knew how to use a gun for my own protection. I had plenty of beaux, but she'd taught me her trade, not wanting me to feel I had to get married unless I truly fell in love. She was a sensible woman, but today I wished she'd just let things alone and not consider proprieties. I couldn't stand the thought of the embarrassment in my cowpuncher's eyes when I told him what my aunt Grace considered cold hard facts.

OUR HOUSE stands near one end of the business street and, outside the picket gate, I turned down toward the mercantile. I didn't really expect to see my cowpuncher, but I'll admit, as I went slowly along the planked walks, I couldn't help but look at the passersby.

"Cologne," I said to Chester at the mercantile, after we'd passed the time of day. "What's the best and most expensive bottle you have?" I had to ask, Aunt Grace would want to know.

"All's the same, Mindy." He grinned. "We ain't got none left."

And that, I thought, settled that.

Outside, my heart jumped a mile. Across, in front of the cafe, was the very man I'd been thinking about. He saw me and came ploughing across the wide sunbaked street as though two buckboards weren't bearing down on him. He didn't even see the doctor's rig.

"Miss Mindy," he said and whipped off his hat. There was hesitancy in his blue eyes. "Maybe you'd be willing to do something else for me, though I have no right to ask it." He sort of

stood on one foot and then the other. "Before I close the deal for the ranch I've picked out, would you ride out with me and tell me if a girl would find it a good place to live? It would be a real favor if you'd be so kind, Miss Mindy."

"Why, I'd love to," I said and flushed with pleasure. "But I couldn't go riding with a man whose name I don't know, could I?"

He looked startled then, with a twinkle in his eye, he bowed. "Allow me." he said. "Al Jardine at your service, Ma'am."

Suddenly we were both laughing fit to kill. It was as though we'd known each other forever and were that close. But that wasn't the only feeling I had. Not just of friendship. Mine went deeper, and I was certain sure he wasn't feeling the way I wanted him to. I'd rather have had his heart pound like mine was doing and had the excitement in him that bubbled in me.

I thought of Mrs. Dalton. Aunt Grace would have fits, but I *could* sew all night, couldn't I?

I DID JUST that, catching only a couple of hours sleep before I went back to work. And Aunt Grace didn't make any objection, though she did look powerfully worried about the dress. Or I guess it was the dress.

It was late morning, and a beautiful one, when Al and I rode out of Prairie Wells, passing the incoming stage on the way. We headed toward the cut which led into the wide lush valley miles west of town. Al's eyes had brightened when he saw me in levis and white blouse, my gun strapped on, but he didn't make any comment like some cocky cowboys I know would have.

I don't know what we talked about as we loped along. Sometimes we didn't say anything, but even our silences filled my heart with joy.

We pulled up for lunch under a clump of trees and I insisted on fixing it. After Al built a fire, he stretched out on the ground, propped on an elbow. I was very conscious of his eyes following my every movement. I couldn't stop myself from going over to him. He reached out and drew me down beside him and I felt his warm breath on my face. I closed my eyes and felt his lips press against mine, and even though I knew what I was doing, nothing on earth could have stopped me....

We realized, later on, that the sunlight had shifted and it was late.

"Oh, Al," I said guiltily, "the lunch! We should be on our way to the valley by now...."

I had filled my saddle bags at home and soon had the coffee boiling. I'd baked biscuits and now I heated them and the beans over the coals, while I cooked steak and opened canned peaches.

Al ate like he'd never seen food before.

All along I'd been feeling guilty not telling him about Aunt Grace's reaction to his proposed present. I'd do it later, but I didn't want to spoil these few hours alone with him. Not once had he mentioned Alice and I wanted to keep it that way as long as I could. I noticed as we rode on that he was quieter. I caught him looking at me once in a while with a sort of question in his eyes. He flushed when our eyes met.

We reached the valley an hour later. A lump came into my throat, as it always did when I saw it. I'd been born here. Why the thought hadn't occurred to me before I don't know.

"Does your spread have towering trees and a wide meadow in front of the house? Does it have a view of the mountains that makes your troubles seem tiny?"

He pulled up and so did I. "Yes," he said, looking at me searchingly. "Why?"

"I was born there." Tears came to my eyes and I spurred my horse. I hadn't realized I'd always considered this my home, even though two differ-

ent ranchers had lived there since Aunt Grace sold it. And now the man I loved, for I surely did, would be living in it with another girl.

As I rode I determined not to tell Al he shouldn't send the hat. Let him, then if her parents thought he was uncouth and didn't know proper conduct like Aunt Grace said, they'd refuse to let Alice have anything more to do with him.

THE DEVIL got into me then. Al didn't know hats. I did and I'd help myself as best I could. I'd make the kind of hat I only sold to the dance hall girls, garish and flamboyant with trimmings. I'd guarantee when I finished no Boston lady would be caught dead wearing it. I could trim it so it would scream a certain kind of girl, and Alice and her parents would believe that was the only kind Al knew and that he'd taken their advice about what to buy. That would surely make Alice refuse to come west.

Somewhere along the line, I'd lost sight of the fact that I was going to save him from himself, now I was only thinking of saving him for me. I couldn't help to lure Alice out here, not when I cared so much. Maybe when she flatly refused, I'd have some little chance with him. It looked as if I could help make that chance come.

Al caught up with me and reached for my bridle. "Let's go back to town," he said quietly.

I didn't argue. I didn't look at the house either. To let out my pentup emotion, I took easy shots, as I loped along, at jackrabbits that infested the land.

"You'd be good to have around if Indians came along," Al said admiringly and I was grateful for his crumb of praise.

"There's plenty of wild turkey and all kinds of game in the mountains," I said. "When I was a kid I used to shoot with my Pa. Maybe sometime I'll show you where they roost."

He looked at me searchingly again and, for no reason, I blushed.

Aunt Grace didn't ask me why I'd come home earlier than she'd expected and I couldn't have explained it anyway. I plunged into sewing, surprised and ashamed that she'd done some of it herself while I'd been out.

Al was to come by after supper. Before he came, though, I selected a bonnet shape that was becoming to me and pinned the trimming on. I really trimmed it. I put on loops of red and black satin ribbons, sprays of outsize red roses and too many curly feathers, clumping bunches of veiling at the upswept back of the brim so it would fan over a girl's chignon. There's a fine line between what's proper for a lady and what is not. I made this unmistakably what was not.

Aunt Grace limped in from the kitchen with coffee as I pinned on the last rose. "That," she said, "is for Alice?"

I blushed and nodded. She simply looked at me and went back to her room. Before she closed the door she said, "I'll meet your friend some other time. I'm going to bed." Almost as an afterthought she said, "Oh, by the way, Mindy, Chester finally found a bottle of cologne at the mercantile. He sent it over." She motioned to a side table and closed her door.

There it was in a gilded cardboard box decorated with violets. I looked from it to the hat and set my mouth firmly, the way my aunt does. The hat would go east, not the cologne. And Al would never really know why Alice broke their engagement.

WHEN HE came in his blue eyes held a look I couldn't exactly fathom. "I've got something to tell you," he said and I caught the hidden excitement in him. Then his eyes lit on the hat. He showed such instant approval of the garish creation my heart sank. He was so trusting and so gullible.

Al hadn't been around enough to know how wrong it was for Alice. His smile, though, seemed more for me than for the hat and a little shiver ran through me. But my guilt lay heavy too. Could I really do this to the man I loved? Could I have this on my conscience, even if he were later to learn to care for me? Could I ever look myself in the mirror again?

I jerked the bonnet off the table. "Sit down, Al," I said. He frowned, but he went over and sat on the horsehair sofa.

I got the cologne and gave him the gift that could bring Alice west at the same time it ruined my life and all hope of his love.

I sat down beside Al, knowing what I had to do, what my Aunt Grace knew I had to do when she'd questioned me about the hat.

"Al, I'm a hateful deceitful busybody." I told him then all of it, I told it quickly to get through with it. Then I handed him the box.

He took it and put it down beside him. "Why did you tell me, Mindy?" he asked and there was urgency in his question. He wasn't angry and he didn't look at me with dislike in his eyes, like I'd been so afraid he would. "Why," he persisted, "did you care whether I married Alice or not?" He moved a little closer.

"Does it make any difference?" I said. A girl can't tell a man right out she loves him; at least I can't.

His arm went around me then and he tilted my chin so I had to meet his eyes. My heart jumped a whole mile, because I could see the excitement bubbling in him the way it was in me.

"I found out today, Mindy, you're everything a man could want. Will you give me a chance to make you love me and later, if you can, will you marry me and go to your valley? I bought the ranch this afternoon."

I could scarcely believe my own ears I was so happy, but I fought it down. "What about Alice?" I asked.

"During many lonely months riding the range, I built up a picture of Alice and our future. I didn't face up to reality. I wouldn't admit that she'd never be happy roughing it as we all have to out here. I wouldn't admit that I didn't love her enough to go east. I met you." He smiled. "Then I knew that all I'd had for Alice was petticoat fever. You see, Mindy, you're the girl I've always dreamed of." He took a letter out of his pocket. "This came on the stage that passed us as we rode out of town. Alice is marrying her childhood sweetheart."

He picked up the cologne and slanted a glance across at the hat. "We'll send this to her for a wedding present," he said and grinned. "But I still think the hat's a humdinger."

If he did, it was good enough for me. I'd take off half the trimmings and wear that hat the rest of my life. There never was a hat that meant so much!

Then Al was kissing me. This was love and no petticoat fever. I knew!

RENEGADE KISSES

by Charles Beckman

She would never have done it but for the memory of lips that burned into hers.

THE DRY southwestern wind rustled across the brushland and pressed the thin cotton shirt against Gail Rawlings, outlining the young, firm curves. She was small and the big horse made her look smaller. The black stallion under her stumbled once and she gasped and grabbed for the pommel. Regaining his footing, the stallion reeled along the wagon trail, slipping and staggering down the gentle slope to the creek. A hint of anger touched her brown, gold-flecked eyes when part way down the horse fell upon his knees. "You're both just alike," Gail said aloud, "Always getting drunk, every time you go to Red Gap!" The stallion's ear twitched downward, as if he had heard, then he shook his head violently trying to return the ear to its original place. She twisted her lithe, lean body, shifting her weight to help the horse gain his footing. She had gotten Gramps safely passed-out in the one-cell jail in town and now she was trying to get the horse back to the H Bar D's corral. Gramps really didn't mean to do anything wrong. He just couldn't stay away from the red-eye for longer than two weeks at a time, and here lately he had been taking the stallion long and they had both become soused.

She feared for Gramps safety when he went on these sprees. He was the only family she had and she was afraid his blustering, bragging manner would get him in trouble with one of those hotheaded young c o w p o k e s—he still packed a gun although he was seventy-five last spring. Besides she needed the horse in her work, running the H Bar D, which was a seven day job a week, although it wasn't much of a spread.

The stallion's other ear started twitching now and he gathered speed as he s m e l l e d the water of Cartridge Creek. The ear twitching wasn't the only effect that the horse suffered when he got this way, she remembered and a slight blush tinged her cheeks.

Suddenly she heard the whinnying, high-pitched and shrill from across the creek and the stallion jumped once and she felt herself falling through space and saw the lighter outline of his chest as he passed over her, narrowly missing her with his hoofs. She felt the wet, cool

mud seeping through the shirt, through the Levies, and she choked with the anger running through her and glanced up in time to see the stallion nibbling at the mane of a buckskin mare across the creek.

"Come back here, you—you woman chaser! You're just like Gramps!" The mare kicked her heels and they both trotted off a little further.

Painfully she gathered herself together, the smelly ooze plastering her clothes against her. She ran stiffly toward the pair, but when she was almost there they trotted further into the brush.

Finally, she lost them and she searched the creek banks for almost an hour without a trace of either. The sticky mud had dried to a hard cake on her back, on her long legs, and the smell was nauseating. It was a long walk to the H Bar D from here, so when she reached a secluded pool she built a fire from the dry mesquite. She washed most of the mud out of her clothes and hung them to dry over the sharp branches of the nearest tree. The mid-branches of the nearest tree. The mid-afternoon sun reached their rays through the overhang and sparkled against her pool. The almost clear water was cool and soothing and some of her anger disappeared as she splashed and swam like a mermaid.

SHE HEARD the crashing of a horse in the underbrush; the sound coming nearer and nearer. Thinking it the stallion she started to wade out, walking carefully so as to not startle the horse this time. Then she almost screamed when she saw the horse. There was a man sitting astride, and it wasn't her horse at all. She ducked further down in the water until it was up to her chin, her face a flaming red.

He was tall and lean and he set the rangy pony like a man used to spending most of his time in the saddle. His dark, tanned face was broken with a grin that made him look handsome. He dismounted quickly, easily, and silently. The short denim jacket was worn for comfort, not show, and the six gun was strapped low and tied with a thong around his leg. The gun looked deadly in its worn, black holster and the blue had been worn shiny by his thumb. He was grinning at her boldly.

She glanced around desperately. "Go 'way, please! Can't you see you're not welcome?"

He leaned against a mesquite and casually began building himself a smoke. He appeared to be in no hurry to go anywhere. "Is that a way to treat a stranger, Ma'am?" he asked reproachfully.

Gail seethed with hopeless rage. "Won't you please go away so I can put my clothes on?" she asked appealingly.

He raised one eyebrow, then settled himself on his haunches, enjoying his smoke. "You mean you're plumb—I mean, you're in your birthday suit?" The grin was still in his eyes and behind his words.

Gail had forgotten her embarrassment in her furious anger at him. She tried edging toward the opposite bank, but stopped when she remembered the quicksand that rimmed that bank, trapping her here. She turned back to the man, her blue eyes snapping. "If you don't go away I'll scream for my Gramps."

The man didn't move a muscle. "Mighty lonely around here, Ma'am. Don't reckon nobody but the buzzards would hear you if you yelled your head off." Then he asked, "What's your name, Ma'am?"

"Gail. Gail Rawlings," she said. Her teeth were beginning to chatter. The cool water was sending a chill through her slender body.

"Gail," he mused half to himself. "That sure is a pretty handle. You're an awful pretty girl, too, what I can see of you, Gail." He grinned again and the devil was in his eyes. "Why don't you come on out? Peers like that water is a mite cold. Your clothes are dry now..."

Indignation filled her eyes and she

became angry all over again, momentarily forgetting her discomfort. "You—you—you polecat!" she gasped.

He threw back his head and laughed at that. His strong white teeth flashed in the slanting rays from the setting sun. He was a mighty good-looking hombre, but a polecat nonetheless.

"Make a deal with you," he offered. "I'll ride out of sight while you get dressed if you'll do something for me in return."

"What?" she demanded, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Give me a kiss," he said boldly.

She gasped. Then she told him what she thought of him, using some of Gramps' pet cuss words to underscore her feelings.

He just laughed harder. "Well, I got all night to set here. But I reckon you'll be gettin' pretty cold, come night. Liable to be snakes in that creek at night, too. Water moccasins." His eyes were grinning again, mockingly.

She glanced about nervously, half furious and half frightened by his words, then looked at him again. He sure was good-looking. A lot handsomer than any of the men around these parts. Under different circumstances she wouldn't have minded kissing him at all. Why did he have to be such a skunk!

WHEN THE sun disappeared behind the bank her lips turned blue from the cold and she was almost boiling in her frustration. Then she heard a sibilant swish nearby in the water. She recalled what he'd said about snakes and she uttered a shriek. Then, so furious she could hardly speak, she said to him, "All right, you win, you polecat!"

He grinned from ear to ear looking tremendously amused and pleased with himself. Then he mounted his horse and rode out of sight. She crawled shivering from the water, dried herself and got dressed, admitting grudgingly that at least he was enough of a gentleman to stay out of sight while she made herself respectable.

But in a few minutes he came riding in through the brush. He swung off his horse and without any preliminaries, caught her up in his arms. He held her tightly and she struggled vainly in his grasp. Then after ages it seemed his searching lips found hers. The kiss jolted through her like a bolt of fire. She gasped and drew away. "O-only one," she said weakly. But he pulled her to him again and this time she didn't struggle at all. She pressed herself against him, and suddenly the strength went out of her. She felt herself being lowered gently backwards; then her groping hand encountered the cold metal of his gun. Quickly she drew it and jammed it hard into his stomach. "Now, Mister," she said breathlessly, "Back up there. Don't think I won't use this thing, either!"

He took a backward step, the grin fading from his lips, but his eyes still laughing.

"Now turn around," she ordered.

She couldn't understand why her heart should be pounding so madly. She walked to his horse and mounted. "I'll leave your gun up the creek a little ways, where you can find it. I should throw it away, though," she told him furiously. She wheeled his horse viciously as he turned, and she could hear his laughter above the pounding of the hoofs. "I'll be a'coming after my horse," he shouted, "and then I'll finish that kiss."

ON THE WAY to the ranch, she marveled at the powerful speed of the little horse. Just like him, she thought, the power and speed hidden; coiled like a rattler just under the surface. Her hands were still shaking, and his kiss burned her lips, and she was shaken almost to the toe of her boots by that kiss, and she knew that no man had ever moved her so before.

At the ranch, she tied the stranger's horse to the rack in front, near the rosebushes. As she entered the kitchen, she

realized that she hadn't eaten since early that morning. Although she wasn't hungry, she knew she should prepare something. She had gotten the big cook stove blazing when she heard a rapid pounding on the door. She felt her knees go weak. What if it was him, returning for his horse, and another kiss? She walked to the door, half afraid, half expectantly. But it was only Reilly Meirs, the boy who worked for Old Man Wells, a mile further back in the rugged brushland.

"Oh," she said, "It's you." She noticed the disappointment in her voice.

Reilly was lean and hungry-looking and about her own age. The bones protruded from his youthful face, as if they had grown faster than the rest of him. Gail had known him for a long time and when they were just kids they had ridden calves like a couple of wild Indians, until Gramps had found out about it, and had tongue-lashed them both.

He stood in the door, now, white-faced and nervous.

"Well," she said, "aren't you coming in?" He entered and she saw then the big six-gun strapped to his small hips. On him it looked ridiculous. "Just where do you think you're going, dressed like that?"

He didn't answer at first, but started peering behind the doors and into the living room. "Where is the rider of that horse tied up in front of your porch?"

She frowned. "He's not here, Reilly. I rode the horse home."

"Home from where? Where is he now?" He was almost shouting in her face now. "From town?"

She hesitated. She didn't dare tell him the humiliating story about the man catching her swimming and kissing her. Quickly, she made up a story about her horse straying, down at Cartridge Creek, and meeting a stranger who loaned her this horse.

Reilly's face looked sick. "That stranger was Nel Evans," he choked. "He's an escaped convict, a killer. There's a $5,000 reward for his capture, dead or alive. You're lucky he didn't harm you, Gail!"

She took a step backward, as if his words had been a physical blow, knocking her off balance. That handsome stranger an outlaw...a killer? No, it wasn't possible! His eyes had seemed so clear, his lips so clean...

She gathered her flustered senses, realizing that Reilly was staring at her strangely. "But—but why should you carry a gun?" she stammered. "You don't have any quarrel with him."

"Five thousand dollars is a lot of bounty money," Reilly said slowly. "I aim to bring that hombre's scalp in—"

Gail's face whitened. "No, Reilly! You can't go bounty hunting after a killer—" She talked to him as she always did, like a big sister, pleading with him not to risk his life.

BUT HE SHOOK his head, youthful stubbornness ridging his jaw. "There's no use a'talkin' about it, Gail. I want that money. There's no other way in the world I could ever get that much money. If I could collect that bounty, I can buy a herd of my own and settle down on my own spread. You know how Pa was always working and drinking up the money at some saloon. You know how hard Mom and us kids had it. Wal, I'm tired of working for somebody else, and this is my chance to get a stake. A good stake!"

"No, Reilly, don't do it," she cried desperately. "You'll just get yourself hurt." But he was already crossing the porch, his boots clumping noisily on the wooden flooring.

Gail grabbed the worn door for support, suddenly feeling a shivering and her legs felt like rubber sticks. She recalled how he had waited on the creek bank. A murderer? Could Reilly have been mistaken? Surely that kiss...

She would never forget the thrill of that kiss. The goose-pimples were still there, even now.

Early the next morning Gail rode down Red Gap's dusty main street, past

Ed Blanco's saloon and Tanner's livery stable to the square, adobe shack that once served as a jail. That was in the days when Red Gap had been a roaring mining town using a sheriff and two deputies. Now the jail was falling apart, and was only used when Ed Blanco brought in a drunk to sleep it off, or Gramps wandered in too dazed with red-eye to make it back to the H Bar D.

She looped the backamore over the warped and whittle-knotched hitch rail and crossed the boardwalk into the dim light. She expected to find Gramps asleep on the bunk, and was surprised to find him sitting at the dusty, unused desk, leaning way back in the swivel chair, his feet propped high. "Well, what you want?" he roared, and the windows rattled with the force of his voice, "If you got a complaint, let's hear it. I'm the sheriff. Speak up. Cain't hear a word you say!"

She stared at him wide-eyed, too surprised to speak for a moment. Then she said, "It's me Gramps. Gail. And you should be wearing your glasses like the doctor said."

"Who me? Don't need glasses. Can see better than a Piute Indian on the—"

She was still trying to understand this surprising situation. "What did you say about the sheriff, Gramps? What are you talking about?"

"Yep. Elected last night. The people around these parts finally came to me in their hour of need, because they knew I used to be sheriff back in the wild days. Back at Dodge City, when men were men—"

"Gramps! You weren't either."

"Wal...Wal. I knew Ely Spartan, and he was sheriff for a little while until he got hisself killed." His voice lowered a shade or two. "And that's about the same as me bein' Sheriff there!"

"But Gramps, why all of a sudden does Red Gap need a sheriff? We haven't had a sheriff here in years."

"Bunch of thievin', rustlin' owlhooters moved into this country. Nel Evans and his bunch. Been stealin' cattle and causin' trouble in town."

Nel Evans again. Gail felt a sinking sensation in her stomach.

"WELL, THERE ain't a man this side of Abilene that can stand up to me in a fair fight, fist or guns!" The old man twirled his long, drooping, tobacco-stained mustache. "I don't intend to let the people of Red Gap down, neither." He polished at the silver star badge on his vest, and Gail noticed that his hands shook slightly. There was a tiny tremor in his voice, too, and she knew the old ranny well enough to know that he was scared inside, in spite of all his bluster.

Tears came to her eyes. "But, Gramps, don't you see what they're doing to you?" she said. "They're getting you killed, that's what. You never fought anyone and we both know it. Don't you see, they're hiding their own cowardice behind your coat tails? I knew your wild tales would get you in trouble one of these days!"

"Go on home, Girl, and take care of the stock. Don't you go a'worrying about Jake Rawlings."

"Gramps, I won't let you do it. Come back with me, now, while there's still time." A tear squeezed its way through her long lashes and stained her cheek. "Please, Gramps."

"Go on home," he shouted.

She turned; the tears flowing freely now, and groped her way out the door.

During the night, Gramps' stallion had found his way back to the ranch. She knew her grandfather's stubborn streak well enough to know that arguing was useless. But she had to think of something...

She was still worrying over it when she rode into the ranch yard. Then she saw a man sitting on the front porch and her heart came up in her throat. It was Nel Evans, the outlaw!

He walked up to her, wearing the familiar grin. She looked at him in the fresh morning air, and again the im-

possibility of his being a cold-blooded killer swept over her.

"Came back to collect my hoss, Ma'am," he said. But his eyes had the devilment in them again and they were saying that they'd come to collect more interest on the unfinished kiss.

She wanted him to leave the ranch yard before young Reilly showed up and somebody was killed. "I'll help you saddle your horse," she said nervously. "You'll have to leave right away, though. Some men from town are looking for you—for the bounty money—"

He raised one eyebrow but showed no other surprise at her knowing now, who he was. They went to the corral and saddled the horse. "Why don't you meet me at the creek again tonight?" he asked. "I'd like to talk to you. If you know about the bounty money, then you've heard a lot of lies about me." His voice suddenly softened and he appeared to be deadly serious. "I've never met a girl like you, Gail. I want to talk to you...to tell you my side. You aren't afraid to meet me, are you?"

She looked up into his eyes, feeling almost hypnotized under their powerful spell. She half swayed toward him. "All right," she breathed. "I—I'll meet you..."

A corner of his mouth smiled and suddenly his arm swept her to him and he kissed her. The same jolt raced through her, turning her legs limp. Then he was gone.

THAT NIGHT Gail rode cautiously into the thickening brush along the creek bank. Her heart was thudding heavily and she felt the reins become slippery from the perspiration in her palms. This was a loco thing to do. A dozen times since she'd left the ranch she had the impulse to swing her horse around and high tail it away from there. But something stronger forced her to go on...the memory of a kiss that had burned her lips as no other kiss had ever done.

That part of her that had responded to Nel's kiss told her that she owed the man that much—at least to hear his side of the story. Men had been misjudged before. Maybe he was really innocent of the crime that had sent him to the penitentiary. A vision of his wide, smiling grey eyes and clean-cut face flashed before her eyes and she felt convinced of it. He couldn't be a vicious desperado the way people were saying...

Suddenly a horse materialized out of the brush before her as quietly as a ghost. When he stopped close to her she raised a hand and placed it against his chest, but his hands on her shoulder pulled her forward and his lips held hers for a long moment. This time she did not struggle, but went to him gladly, knowing now that her lips belonged to him anytime he wanted to claim them.

Finally, she broke away and when she spoke her voice was ragged and her breathing was heavy. "Nel..." she whispered.

He settled back in his saddle and in the soft light that was spreading across the chaparral from the full moon, she could see a bitter smile on his lips. "So, you know my name now and all about me. Maybe you'd like to collect the bounty money that's on my head, the way everyone else is trying to do..."

"Please." She was looking at him through tear-stung eyes and her throat was constricted.

He moved one shoulder. "Sorry. Guess I'm on the prod at everybody. Man gets that way when he's always being hunted like an animal..."

She swallowed painfully. "They say you once murdered a man in cold blood. That you escaped from prison and now you're the leader of a gang of rustlers and killers..."

"And you believed them?"

She closed her eyes. She did not answer for a moment. "I—I don't know what to believe," she whispered. "I want to hear you tell me what—what I should believe."

Before she opened her eyes she felt the electrifying touch of his lips against

her lips. "Believe what your heart tells you," he whispered against her lips. "Don't believe these lies. They've all been made up by men who hate me, who want me hung so they can collect bounty money on me. I'm not what they say, Gail."

Her heart gave a wild bound of joy. "Nel...Nel—"

"I want you to go away with me, Gail. We're leavin' these parts soon, in another day or so. I love you and I want you to go with me."

She could not answer his words at once. She pressed her fingers against her temples. "I...don't know," she said in a small voice. "Please, Nel, give me a little time to think—"

"But you believe I'm innocent now?"

"Oh, yes—yes!" she cried, her young face upturned and filled with trust.

"Then I'll give you a little time to make up your mind. But the next time I see you I'll be wantin' an answer!" He smiled with his lips and his eyes and he touched the rim of his Stetson. *"Adios!"* And he vanished like a shadow into the brush.

SHE RODE into town from there to see about Gramps. Her head was bowed and churning with thoughts. When she turned into the main street of Red Gap she was so preoccupied that she didn't notice all the excitement right at first. Then she saw a group of ranchers in front of Blanco's saloon, gesturing wildly and talking loudly. The same thing was happening at the barber shop. People were running back and forth between the two groups and a light was burning in every store.

She wheeled her horse around to the group in front of the saloon. Everyone was talking at once and she could see the fear on their faces. Finally she cornered a rancher she knew, Lars Peerman. "What happened, Lars? Why is everyone—"

"Nel Evans' gang of side-winders rustled Jim Tates' cattle," he said breathlessly. "And when Jim tried to

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stop them, they killed him. Shot him six times in the face. It's awful. Looks like sausage. Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Rawlings."

She had swayed and almost tumbled out of the saddle. Her face was white as a sheet. Shakily, she drew a breath while her icy fingers clamped around the reins. *It couldn't be. Nel couldn't be responsible for a thing like that. Not after what he'd just told her with the straightforward sincerity she'd seen in his eyes. It was a horrible mistake...*

Suddenly she grabbed Lars' arm. "Gramps...He's..."

"He's all right, Miss Rawlings. He's over at the jail—"

"Thank goodness."

"You know that kid, Reilly Meirs, well he—"

"What about Reilly Meirs?" She felt the strength leave her in a rush. "Where is he?"

"Well, after they shot up Jim Tate, they rode into town drunk and looking for trouble, and Reilly got himself shot. They're digging the slugs out over at the Doc's. He's going to be—"

"Take me over there, will you, Lars?"

As they climbed the rickety steps above the barber shop, she suddenly remembered. "What time did this happen, Lars?"

"Was just about dusk, Miss Rawlings, when they rode in."

She stopped dead in her tracks, her mind reeling.

"What...what's the matter, Miss Rawlings? Why are you looking like that?"

"It's—it's nothing. Hurry!"

Reilly Meirs was stretched on the table when they entered. The old Doc was bending over him, working at his shoulder with a long, pointed instrument. Reilly's face was a deathly white, contrasting sharply to the red on the doctor's hands. Gail took his hand as the tears dimmed her eyes. He turned his

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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head to meet her, and she saw the pain in them and the way he bit his lips to hold it back.

"Gail...I was...h o p i n g you'd come," he whispered.

She kissed his hand. She couldn't speak for the sobs that racked her body.

"He's going to be all right, in a few days," the doctor said gruffly, "Soon as I find this slug."

"Gail...Gail...I been wanting to ask you something. You...you... know that spread I was telling you about? A...a...man can't live on a ranch by himself."

"Don't talk if it hurts so, Reilly."

"I guess I've always loved you, Gail. Even...even back when we were kids."

She saw him take a deep breath and hold on. "Soon...soon...as I get the reward...Gail...I want you to be my...wife." She turned away quickly lest he see the shame burning her cheeks. He closed his eyes and his breathing rasped through the room. She groped blindly for the door. She couldn't stay here, now, feeling the way she still felt for Nel Evans.

IT WAS NEARLY noon when Gail awoke. She worked f e v e r i s h l y throughout the afternoon and into the evening to keep from thinking. At nine o'clock there was a gentle tapping at her kitchen door. She looked up startled. Before she could answer, the door opened abruptly. Nel Evans commanded, "Blow out the lamp; quick!"

As her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she could make out faintly the lighter outline of the windows. She heard nothing but the squeak of the rusty windmill in a light breeze and the pounding of her pulse like the thumping of hooves on a dry creek bed.

Suddenly she felt the strength of his arms around her and she thought wildly, "This is what I've been needing. Oh, Nel—Nel, don't leave me, ever—"

He kissed her hungrily. Finally, she

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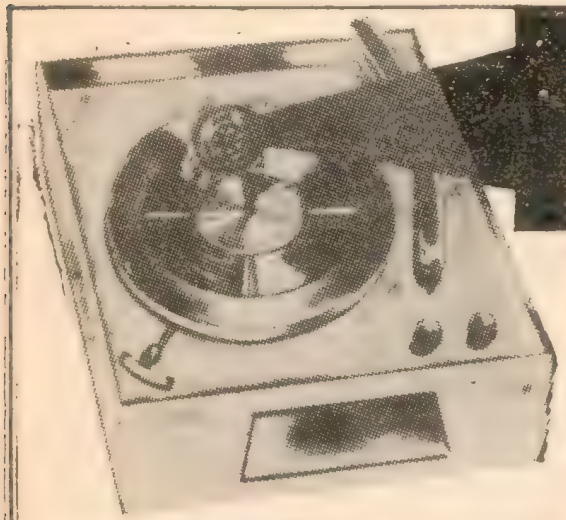

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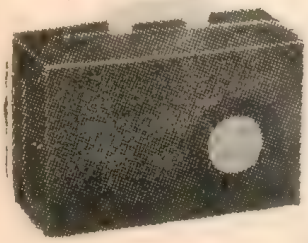

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moved away from him, the doubt, the fear tugging at her heart again. "Nel—they're saying your men killed Jim Tate last night—"

His lips pressed together and his eyes narrowed. "Gail, you're going to have to get used to men making up lies about me. When a man is hunted the way I've been, when any crime is committed anywhere in his part of the state, he is blamed for it!"

"Then—then you weren't mixed up in it?"

Pain showed in his eyes. "How could I, Gail?" he asked gently. "I was with you on the creek—"

Relief made her weak again and she went into his arms. "Forgive me, Nel," she cried against his shoulder. "I've—I've been so mixed up—"

He rubbed his cheek against her hair softly. "I understand, Gail—it'll take time—but one day you'll stop believing all these lies about me."

She raised her tear-streaked face—"I stopped believing them now," she whispered.

His arm tightened about her. "I'm leaving these parts for good—tomorrow—will you go with me, Gail?"

Time seemed to stand still for a moment, awaiting her answer. She closed her eyes and her heart made her lips answer, "Yes," she said simply—because she could no longer fight her need for him.

"Meet me behind the livery stable in town tomorrow at noon—be ready to leave—but travel light." He kissed her once more. Then he was gone.

For a long time, she stood there, not moving. Then she found the lamp and lit it, looking down at the flame. She felt dazed; numb. Then she remembered. She would need the saddle bags that hung in the barn. She opened the door and Reilly Meirs walked in. His face was ashen, his eyes grim.

"I've been knocking until my knuckles are sore," he said. He wore a white

bandage on his shoulder and his shirt was torn.

"I...I didn't hear you, Reilly."

"You've got to come with me into town, Gail.'

"Why?"

"It just ain't safe for a girl to be alone out here with all those murdering fools running around loose. You can stay at Ma Keyes."

She hesitated. She didn't want to cause his suspicion so it would be best to do as he asked. "All right, Reilly. I guess you're right. Get the saddle bags for me. They're in the barn."

"Sure. Right away."

When he returned, she had everything ready. "That gang is going to hold up the bank tomorrow at noon."

She looked at him blankly. "What...what did you say?"

"I said that Nel Evans' gang is a'goin to hold up the bank tomorrow at noon."

Somehow she kept her voice level. "How—how do you know, Reilly?"

"There were a couple of strangers in the saloon tonight. They looked suspicious to me. When they left, I followed them into the alley. They didn't know anyone was around and they started nosing around the bank, looking it over and talkin' about it. They were two of Nel Evans men, all right—"

Her heart turned to ice. If Reilly was right, then tomorrow she would be giving herself to a killer and a thief. But who was right? What should she do? Her mind felt like a whirlpool, not knowing who was right or what was right any more, only knowing her love and need for Nel, and wanting desperately to believe him.

SHE SPENT a sleepless night at Ma Keyes' boarding house. At ten the next morning she had her horse saddled and tied back of the livery stable. The saddle bags bulged with her traveling clothes and necessities.

[*Turn Page*]

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From there she went to the jail to see her grandfather. As she crossed the street she noticed a stranger lounging in front of the barber shop and another on the high steps of the saloon. There were two more at the blacksmith's idly watching him shoe a horse. There was an ugly, brooding tension in the air, like the heavy feeling before a summer thunderstorm. The dust from the street hung suspended in the still air.

She opened the door of the tiny jail. Gramps had his six gun on the desk. He was swabbing the barrel with an oily rag, his gnarled old fingers trembling a little. She stared at his fingers and a sudden fear clutched at her.

"Gramps," she faltered, "what are you doing—"

He looked up, squinted his rheumy old blue eyes nearsightedly. When he'd convinced himself that he was looking at his granddaughter, he bellowed, "Goin' tuh git me some scalps, Gail. Reilly tipped me off that them mangy sidewinders of Nel Evans are goin' tuh rob th' bank."

Her cold fingers went to her throat. "No, Gramps!" She ran around the desk and caught his shoulders. "Please," she pleaded. "if there's any trouble, go back to the ranch. Don't—"

"Somebody's got to do it," he roared,

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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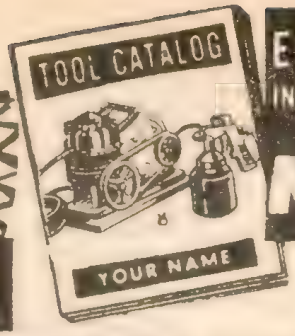

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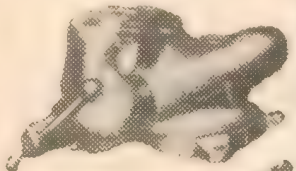

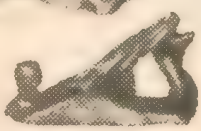

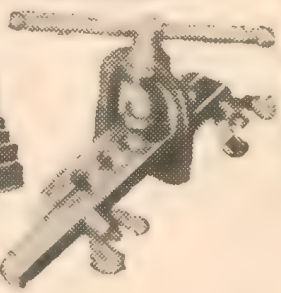

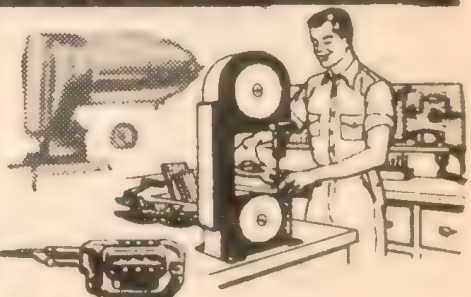

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"and I'm the sheriff, now. It's the sheriff's job to bring those thieving cayotes in to trial!" He spat a steam of tobacco juice at the corner, snapped the cylinder out and fed six shells with heavy brass casings into the gun.

She had never seen Gramps look like this before. "Let the town raise a posse or something. It's not your job, either."

He stubbornly jerked the cylinder into the gun, spun it with his thumb, and returned it to its holster. He crossed to the door. "Now, you stay right here, Gal, and don't be a'getting in the way."

"You're just a bull-head old walrus." she sobbed, but he had already left; crossing the street with the energy of a young man. She started after him, but ran into Reilly on the boardwalk. The heavy .44 was again strapped to his side. His jaw was set in a hard line.

"Where are you going, Reilly?" she heard herself ask, fearfully.

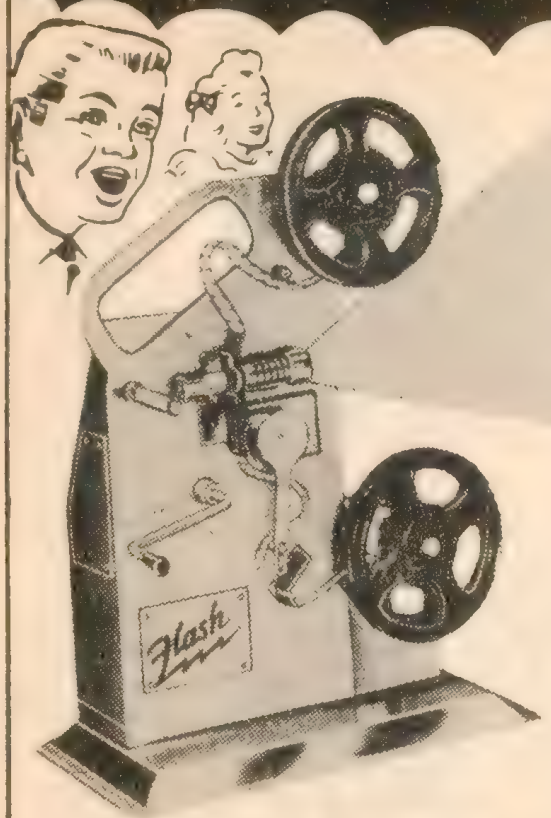
"When they start to robbing the bank, I'm going to get that reward money!"

Before she could say another word, the town was shattered with the explosion of gunfire. The high false fronts echoed the sounds into a continuous roaring. She and Reilly stood frozen, staring in the direction of the livery stable where Gramps had gone.

AN ETERNITY passed before she could take her next breath. Red Gap had changed into a ghost town, except for the six men who had gathered in front of the bank like vultures; waiting. Then she saw the door of the livery stable open and a group of townsmen hurried to the steps outside the barber shop. They carried an inert figure. A man with white hair and flowing mustache. *Gramps!* She screamed frantically. She was across the street and fighting through the crowd before her next heart beat. One of the men held her back.

[*Turn To Page 96*]

REAL 8MM HOME MOVIE PROJECTOR



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"They shot him in the back. We got to get him up to the Doc's right away, Ma'am."

"Who...who did it?" Her broken voice sounded like a hurt animal's whimper.

"Nel Evans. He was a'hiding in the shadows, and when your grandfather went in to arrest him, he shot him in the back."

The words felt like a hot branding iron across her mind. They seared through her heart, too, and she cringed away from them. Nel...the man she had believed and trusted, in the face of everything the town had said about him...the man she had given her lips to so willingly, had cold-bloodedly shot her grandfather. And he was going to kill Reilly, too, because the boy was going after him the same way Gramps had done. Could she believe him any more, now? She had been an infatuated young girl, trusting the smooth words of a man who could lie convincingly because his life was a lie, but now could she believe him—with his bullet in the back of the old man who was her only family?

The tears were a hard lump in her throat, but there was no time for them now. "What time is it?" she asked, and her voice was deadly calm.

The rancher pulled a heavy silver watch from his vest. "Twelve noon, Miss Gail. Why—"

She didn't answer. But she grabbed Gramps' six gun from one of the men who had picked it up and she tucked it into the belt of her Levis.

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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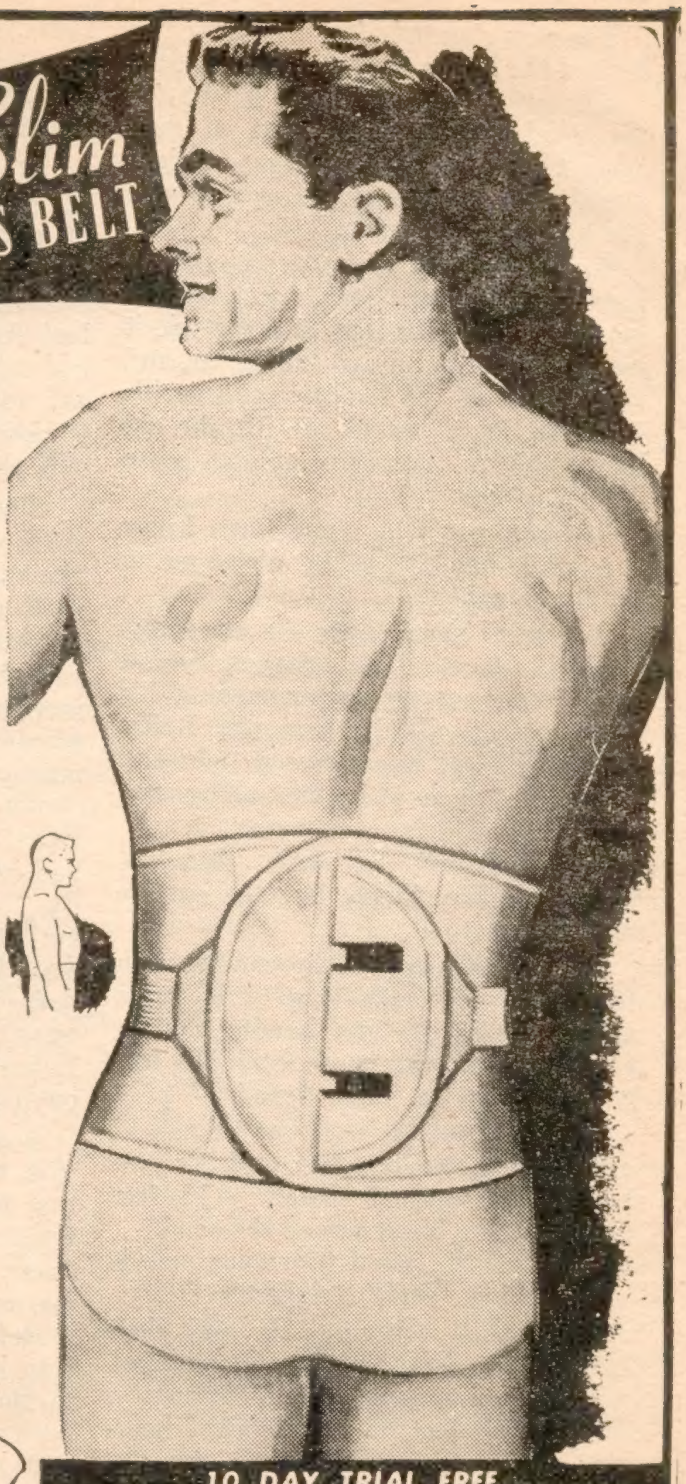

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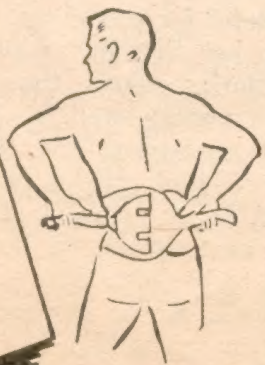

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The men shouted after her as she ran toward the livery stable.

The street was deserted except for the wind that blew a swirl of dust against her. She kept her eyes straight ahead. She could feel the eyes of the rustlers upon her back.

She ducked into the narrow opening between the livery stable and the saloon. It was cooler here and she felt it on her brow. She turned the corner, and there he stood, the familiar smile on his face and for a second she felt the old longing return. There was another horse alongside hers. His.

"I knew you'd be along when I saw the saddle bag," he said. "We've got to hurry, though!"

She didn't move. Then she saw something in his eyes and glanced behind her. Coming up the narrow opening, his hand close to the big gun was Reilly Meirs. His lips were pressed tight and there was a little white knot along each jaw.

"Wait here," he said, then he laughed. A dry laugh, like the crackle of a whip.

He took a step, "Keep coming, you fool, this won't take long." His hands spread above the gun handle like an eagles' talons; only more fatal. His feet were spread; the knees flexed.

The only sounds were the crunch of gravel under Reilly's feet, and her own breathing. The small shadow at his feet danced like a ballet across the sand.

Finally, she found her voice and it was sobbing, "Nel! Nel Evans!"

He glanced at her quickly, and when he saw the gun he whirled, cursing; and his gun appeared as if by magic. She saw his face over the cocked hammer and then she squeezed; quickly. Through the smoke, his face contorted into a mask of disbelief.

She squeezed again and the gun jumped in her hand but she saw only his face before her. She shot again and his head jerked like a puppet on a string. Again she shot and he spun crazily and fell with a thud that tore at her heart. His leg straightened slowly, the boot pushing the sand in front of it and then she couldn't see for the tears that blinded her.

TWO WEEKS later she was sitting on the front porch with Gramps. The old man was propped in a rocking chair, recovering from the .45 slug that had been dug out of his back. He sent a stream of tobacco juice over the porch rail and said, "Pears like young Reilly is ridin' up the road, yonder from his new place."

"Pears like you got awful good sight when you want to use it," Gail sniffed. She left the porch and went down to the yard to meet Reilly.

He rode up to her and drew rein. He looked taller and sat his horse with a new firmness since he'd bought his own spread. He hadn't done it with bounty money, either. Gail could have legally claimed the reward for shooting Nel Evans, but she'd refused it. The bank had been grateful to Reilly because it was his sharpness in overhearing the outlaw's plans that helped save the bank from robbery. So, they made up a reward purse which went to Reilly. It wasn't as large as the bounty on Nel Evans' head, but it made the down payment on a nice place of his own.

Now Reilly asked her to go riding with him, so she saddled her horse and they headed across the pasture. He was wanting to show her his new place, she knew. He'd be wanting to ask her to marry him, too, she knew. And she was grateful for this clean, fresh feeling inside her that had wiped out unhappy memories. She'd thought Reilly had been young—well, so had she. Young and headstrong and foolish. But now they'd both grown up and her heart beat faster as she looked eagerly over the next rise for the house that was going to be hers. Before they reached it though, Reilly stopped his horse and she turned to him. His arms were waiting for her and she went into them with a glad cry.

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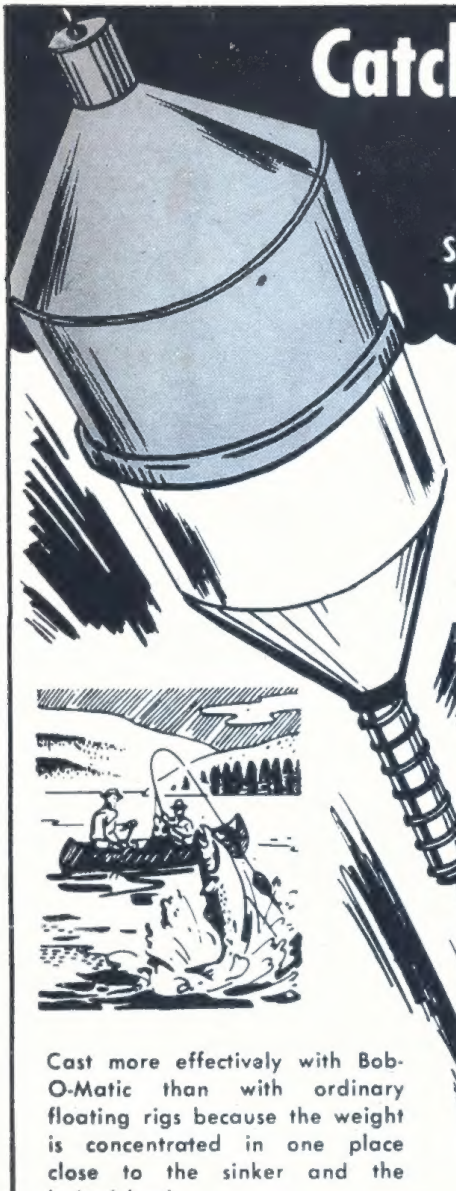

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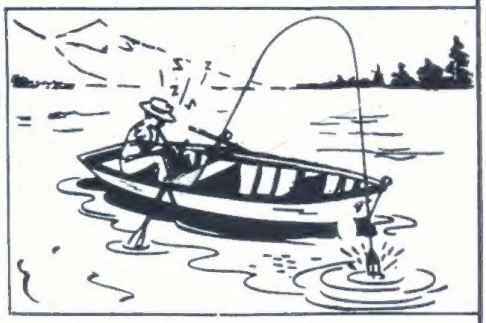

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